

Plural Interculturality

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Translator: Inist



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/8856>

DOI: 10.4000/questionsdecommunication.8856

ISSN: 2259-8901

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Lorraine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2003

ISSN: 1633-5961

Electronic reference

Sylvie Thiéblemont-Dollet, « Plural Interculturality », *Questions de communication* [Online], 4 | 2003, Online since 01 February 2014, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/8856> ; DOI : 10.4000/questionsdecommunication.8856

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

- 1 This special report on the theme of interculturality brings together a number of contributions by researchers from different specialisations (information and communications sciences, history, sociology, literature, cinema, etc) and different parts of the world (Germany, Spain, United States, France, Greece, Poland). In terms of research and university teaching in Europe and elsewhere in the western world, there has been considerable development in this field since 1980 within the multitude of disciplines of which it is, in part, a result. As Jacques Demorgon states, although interculturality has “always formed part of the human condition, it has only been placed in perspective [...] [so] recently” that it offers a large number of definitions and consequently a large body of authors, work and publications, as the object being studied – culture – is still just as wide-ranging. Thus interculturality may be compared to a vast building site where work is constantly in progress, to which anyone – whether a scientist or not – may contribute. An illustration of this is provided by a recent issue of *Communication et Organisation* (2002) on this topic, in which a number of authors each broach, in turn, the complexity and diversity of the field. While Dominique Desjeux (2002: 88; 95) notes in it that “culture is both a structure and a dynamic [...] which makes its analysis and observation [...] difficult, [...] and that it may be just as much a key to functioning better with other people as a means of avoiding them”, we shall emphasise that culture is an integral part of the human being and of the affiliations to which he/she is linked, whether deliberately or not (family unit and history; educational, professional, militant, associational circles; places for living and geographical, historical, political places, etc). Further proof of what is at stake in this topic is provided by the publication of the quarterly review *En Temps Réel* (2003), which

has adopted the subject of “the cultural exception” and in which Jean-Michael Baer expresses its concern faced with the protection of diversity and independent creation. Fears which Jacques Demorgon had already anticipated in *L’Interculturation du Monde* (2000) and takes up again in this special report.

- 2 This legitimates the choice of title – “Plural Interculturality” – since it demonstrates the interest in discussion on the subject of cultures and/or expressions of interculturality, the use of the plural basically evoking the impossibility of broaching the subject in the singular. Lastly, having combined the methodologies, perspectives, viewpoints, disciplines and origins – in the broader sense – of the authors, we believe we have responded to the appeal launched by Yves Winkin (2002, *in* Nowicki, 2002: 63), who wanted to see at least an alliance between communication and anthropology in order to strengthen the field, with the arrival of a new generation of researchers who are bold enough to impose their views.

Intercultural communication – the illustration of an interdisciplinary under construction

- 3 In general, researchers are agreed at least on this intercultural approach; in the words of Jacques Demorgon, it “must be deployed jointly in a large quantity of research work and inventions, if possible by conjugating them rather than opposing them”, and that “it is probably to be found in that search for a dynamic conjuncture of the forms of culture among themselves”. Basically, it is “a process, a method of analysing diversity, [...], involving dialogue, turned towards both the past and a future horizon” (Nowicki, 2002: 64). It represents “all the processes – psychic, relational, group-related, institutional, etc – generated by cultural interactions, in a relationship of reciprocal exchanges and with a view to protecting a relative cultural identity among the partners involved” (Clanet, 1990: 21). However, it must be borne in mind that before imposing itself as a subject for consideration and research, interculturality emerged as a “problem in the field” (Demorgon, Lipiansky, 1999: 11) and, as far as France is concerned, the issue is connected with immigration. Which Ute Fendler illustrates in her analysis, taking as its starting point the violent intercultural encounters presented in the film *Vivre au Paradis* (Bourlem Guerdjou: 1998). The action takes place during the Algerian war of independence, in a climate of hate where the relationship between the dominant parties and the dominated upholds the analysis elaborated by Béatrice Rafoni, according to which “intercultural encounters may reveal antagonism and lead to a war”. We believe it is not without relevance to add here the point of view of Carmel Camilleri (1992, *in*: Fick, 2002: 221), who defends the idea that it is not “the cultures which encounter each other but their carriers, who – by their dynamism – bring in new parameters”. In his own way, Jean Laloum proposes this when, with a work of heritage collection carried out within the association *Mémoires Juives: Patrimoine Photographique* of which he is the founder, he looks back over a period of 80 years (1870-1950) at the evolution of clothing “with a corollary analysis of the family names and first names of the people who wore it”. Thus he shows how, using intercultural intersections, it has been possible for processes of mutations and acculturation to emerge gradually, finally becoming firmly anchored in people’s everyday lives. In the light of these first two examples, we are able to see that the possible intersections between disciplines bring out the very essence of interculturality, in both the singular and the plural. But to be explained in more detail it has to be emphasised

that talking about interculturality comes down to talking about other people in a different way, as “other people” may be described as those people we do not recognise because they are not from the same place as us, or because they are not like us.

- 4 Similarly, in the light of the success of the topic, many researchers are wondering, like Claude Clanet (1990) who is quoted by Béatrice Rafoni as writing “Although in France at the beginning of the century [...] there was much greater cultural heterogeneity than today [...], there was no talk of intercultural situations or intercultural relations”. Why is it that today, in French society and in Western societies more generally, there is “this other way of looking at relations between cultures”? These are questions which should indeed be raised, and to which replies are produced by Jacques Demorgon, Christoph Vatter and Béatrice Rafoni, by connecting intercultural issues and communication. Through their complementary considerations, they show the full complexity connected with the appearance of this young discipline of intercultural communication in scientific circles, because it is both interdisciplinary and a discipline in itself. Moreover, since in order to exist it must fulfil at least two requirements, namely the creation of contact between elements from different cultures, and the space(s) specific for the interaction of this/these confrontation(s), this means that research work on intercultural communication must concern itself with “communicating objects” and socio-cultural objects (media, literature, art(s), NCITs, etc). Consequently, intercultural communication is on the borderline of a number of disciplines; it is an “interdiscipline, a plurality of disciplines, or rather an original multidiscipline” (Nowicki, 2002: 58). To broach the subject in this broad multidisciplinary space, while preserving its specific features and preventing it from becoming an “appendage”, Jacques Demorgon, Béatrice Rafoni and Dominique Colomb suggest a number of interesting solutions and invite researchers to deal with the social phenomena, to construct their own tools, and to bring together specific competences originating from different traditions. Note should also be taken of the dynamic and specific comments made by Dominique Colomb who, on the basis of his work on analysing the expansion of communication in China and his own personal experience, suggests a number of solutions for researchers to enable them to understand interculturality in the plural: setting up a common corpus put together by representatives and of different cultures; making use together of the *a priori* inevitable “culture gap” by means of discussion and feedback; isolating the invariables, if possible through a process of “enrichment and scientific and human openness” (“empathic otherness”). Apart from this aspect, the commitment on the part of this author is interesting, since he “is bold enough to say” what others sometimes hesitate to denounce: interculturality is not only to be found in our relations with people who speak a different language and live by the lights of a culture different to our own; it may also in fact be found within a single professional category by people of very similar culture who speak the same language, perhaps even to the extent of sharing the same idioms and codes.

Compared methodologies

- 5 It would therefore be illusory to think that the intercultural field does not raise any issues of a methodological nature that in some way conceal the acceptance of a comparison of the skills of different and perhaps very divergent disciplinary fields. As Bernard Dagenais (2002) thinks, while the intercultural contribution is inevitable, both inside and outside

the frontiers of each country, the main question is about how to handle this as intelligently as possible. The contributors to this special report have attempted to take this on, and have proposed, and in some cases combined and compared, methodologies taken from different fields.

- 6 At the same time, part of the work has been carried out on the basis of material dealing with immigration, a phenomenon which was originally, in France and elsewhere in Europe, one of the fundamental aspects of interculturality (*cf. supra*). This is the case of the study by Piero D. Galloro who, in order to study the history of migration policies with regard to the recruitment of immigrant labour, has combined the process of simplified circular models (recruitment circles proposed by Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp, 1991) with attested historical data and personal accounts taken from archives. In this way he has highlighted “the categorisations and the hierarchical structures of cultures” or the “mechanisms of an ideological construction of intercultural exclusion”. This representation by “circle logic” is promising in that it also serves to better apprehend the behaviour of those who, feeling that they are excluded from the circle or occupy a peripheral position, appropriate the territory to which they are relegated and build it up as a fortress, and who, from being dominated, attempt to become dominant¹. As Christoph Vatter writes, this proves that while the study of an intercultural phenomenon – immigration, for example – cannot be limited to a single culture, it does not necessarily mean that there are no other cultural spheres involved within the same society, such as “beur” culture in France or the “Kanak Attak” movement in Germany. Indeed Alec G. Hargreaves, who looks into the coexistence of a number of cultures in a single territory, proposes, by investigating the example of “beur” cinema and “suburban ghetto” cinema, the use of a measurement tool used in the English-speaking world (“integrated casting” or “colour-blind casting”) to check whether “casting is open to members of all ethnic groups, on condition that they have the necessary talents, without insisting on a correlation between their personal ethnicity and that of the roles that are to be filled”. His argument demonstrates that, in this professional milieu, the debate on polemical notions such as the “ethnic ghetto” appears to be on the way out, and that post-colonial minorities are participating fully in national cultures.
- 7 With different methodological skills and on the basis of the written press, two authors wonder in their turn about this intermixing of cultures, another configuration of interculturality. Sylvie Thiéblemont-Dollet applies the notion of the “construction of a public problem”, defined by Érik Neveu (1999: 42), and the theorisation proposed by William L. F. Felstiner, Richard L. Abel and Austin Sarat (1991) to a corpus of personal accounts by immigrant women which appeared in *Le Livre Blanc des Femmes de Quartier* and in *Le Monde* between 2001 and 2003, to bring out the elements which constitute an inter-culture (specific to these women) that is under construction and evolving. The study also attempts to reveal that these women are part of a transcultural approach that is spearheaded by certain values such as equality and secularism. This being so, “it is not a matter [...] of falling [here] into the trap which consists of constructing immovable cultural models” (Nowicki, 2002: 59), but rather of seeing how inter-cultures co-construct themselves at a given moment, in a given place (rather like a snapshot illustrates an event in movement). Estrella Israël, for her part, analyses the contemporary Spanish press using a grid covering four aspects: “unawareness, the desire for show, dramatisation, and the refusal of other people”. On these foundations she constructs the original notion of “intercultural noises” which, in journalistic communication, represents

“the stigmatisation, the divergence and the negative interpretation” of other people or people who are “different”. This nevertheless raises a highly complex set of questions (with vague or non-existent answers), involving issues such as whether talking about intercultural matters means stressing difference, similarity, or intermixing, even if experimentation with varied communicational approaches really seems to serve to put a number of these aspects into perspective, and makes it possible to see their contours more clearly.

Experiments in interculturality

- 8 Although originally interculturality comes from the grass roots, and essentially in America, it remains both a “grass-roots object” and the source of much work undertaken above all for utilitarian purposes (in the noble meaning of the term). This approach to considering interculturality is evident in the text by Philippe Hamman, which reveals that one of the solutions likely to be able to break the logic of enclosure, as described by Piero D. Galloro and Sylvie Thiéblemont-Dollet *inter alia*, lies in the application of local governance. It is a process of the “coordination of players, social groups, and institutions”, the function of which is for common objectives to be “defined collectively in fragmented environments”. Referring, for example, to the Saar-Lorraine area, and on the basis of the personal accounts of separate “players”, the political scientist speaks in his turn in the same way as nearly all the other contributors of this “middle ground” and of these “middle-ground territories [...] for public policies in Europe” which provide transfrontier workers and go-betweens with their livelihood. In this study, whether “other people” are French or German, they are an integral part of a new (or current) vision of European construction, despite the verifiable, supposed and/or imaginary difficulties of transfrontier employment and its potential problem areas (pensions, salaries, working hours, etc), which are generally resolved by Community law. By doing so, the case study developed by Philippe Hamman is in line with the comments made by Jacques Demorgon when he recalls, in support of the work of Georges Devereux (1970, 1972), that it would be wrong to think that players from a different culture remained enclosed in their culture: “On the contrary, in both conflicts and arrangements, they make use of the cultures of the other parties involved whenever they find this to be to their advantage”.
- 9 Moreover, in the field of the intercultural economy, the “advantages” or the interests referred to by Jacques Demorgon do exist. In this context, this leads Christoph Vatter to demonstrate the pertinence of intercultural analysis in the international advertising sector, “the internationalisation of a product and its advertising signifying a mediated intercultural communication, in the transfer of goods, know-how and ideas”. Angéliki Koukoutsaki-Monnier has undertaken an analysis of this kind by comparing the home pages on the American, British and Japanese Internet sites of the brand KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken). Contrary to received or conveyed opinion, she uses a very specific type of situation (an educational experiment carried out among American, British and Japanese students at an international commercial college in Paris) to establish that the differences between “low-context or context-poor cultures” (individualism, materialism, importance of action, control over nature and time, etc) and “high-context or context-rich cultures” (importance of the group and the community, spiritualism, acceptance of fate, harmony with nature and the weather, etc) are always just as significant. She therefore posits the

idea that “the Internet is not the one-and-only medium for standardised communication”, as the diversification of the content [of the images] on the national sites constitutes one of the most significant manifestations of the importance of territorial cultural identities”. Basically, she does not share the idea – although it is a popular one – that the images produce common significations between different cultures. Contrary to the texts which, she finds, always raise the problem of translation connected, by nature, to ethnocentrism, a danger that is broached in all the texts in this special report to a greater or lesser degree. The obstacle of translation and interpretation is also the focal point of some highly original research, such as that being carried out by Anna Wierzbicka, a linguist who holds a chair at the Australian national university in Canberra, presented here by Arkadiusz Koselak. Using a descriptive tool she created and has constantly refined² – natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) – she suggests that it is possible to escape the recognised trap of ethnocentrism which implies that, in order to describe other cultures, researchers use terms and references from their own culture. Nevertheless, while this is attractive and rewarding for cultural approaches in this world, the process is still only in its preliminary stages and, as Arkadiusz Koselak rightly emphasises, metalanguage remains abstract, hard to understand, and above all does not say anything about how people are thinking. A point which Dominique Colomb also raises when he writes, inspired by texts by Anne Cheng (1997), that the thinking process is one of “travelling and motion”, and that to “enlighten our scientific minds in another way [they must be given] a sixth sense – a sense of relationship”.

Conclusion

- 10 In the intercultural field, relationships with other people constitute what is probably one of the most difficult aspects to measure, explain and respect. As soon as we refer to other people, there is a very high risk of being trapped by our own vision of the world and our own unique scientific reasoning. That is why, to render their intercultural explanation(s) valid, the authors in this special report have constantly tried to broaden their field of observation and compared their points of view, seeking the “anthropological invariables and the infinite cultural variables” (Desjeux, 2002: 95). In doing so they have helped to validate the fact that the term “interculturality” in both the singular and the plural covers different cultures, languages and idioms, diverse concepts and visions of the world, and even one or more forms of miscegenation. In other words, whenever they were able, they blended together their approaches and forms, and “mixed together different arrangements and combined a number of elements” (Fick: 233), with all due humility. Lastly, by combining their styles, words and genres, they have sought to establish a number of the particularities of interculturality, in the knowledge that here again these are as ephemeral and mobile as the very essence of the human being.

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NOTES

1. This is what film director Rabah Ameur-Zaïmech attempted to show in *Wesh Wesh* (2002), filmed in the Bosquets neighbourhood of Montfermeil.
2. Natural semantic metalanguage is regularly subjected to assessments all over the world.