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Applied Linguistics in Intercultural Communication:
Current Perspectives and Approaches

Intercultural Communication SIG Colloquium at BAAL 2010 Aberdeen

Introduction

Tony Young, Newcastle University, UK (tony.young@ncl.ac.uk) BAALICSIG Convenor
Jane Woodin (j.a.woodin@sheffield.ac.uk) BAALICSIG Treasurer
Colloquium Convenors.

This colloquium is the first contribution of the new Intercultural Communication (IC) SIG to BAAL Annual Meetings. The SIG aims to bring together researchers and practitioners whose interests intersect both fields.

Invitees to the colloquium were asked to consider how applied linguistics can make a significant contribution to the multidisciplinary field of intercultural communication. Suggested focus questions to address were:

- To what extent is it possible to apply three identifiable but competing paradigms in intercultural communication: the social science, interpretive and critical approach to research and practice in intercultural communication pedagogy
- How can we study groups without *a priori* categorisation? Is essentialism essential in IC research?
- To what extent is multimodality and/or mixed methodology desirable, possible or necessary in IC research?
- What are the implications of non-western perspectives on human communication for theory and practice in IC?

In addressing these and related questions, this colloquium aims to showcase and open up for discussion the range of conceptual, methodological and pedagogical perspectives and approaches which exist under the ambit of our SIG.
The colloquium consists of 6 papers and a roundtable discussion. The papers are:

1. *Conceptualising intercultural competence – the need for an applied linguistic approach.*
   Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick. Helen.Spencer-Oatey@warwick.ac.uk.

2. *Developing and assessing intercultural competence – can dynamic assessment be a way forward?*
   Dr Claudia Harsch, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick. C.Harsch@warwick.ac.uk.

3. “to me it doesn’t matter where [they] come from”. *National culture discourses in the multinational workplace.*
   Dr Jo Angouri, UWE, Bristol Jo.Angouri@uwe.ac.uk.

4. *Stereotypes as cultural capital: International students negotiating identities in British HE.*
   Trevor Grimshaw Dep. of Education, Univ. of Bath. t.grimshaw@bath.ac.uk

5. *Applying mixed methods in understanding professional intercultural communication: the case of deontic modality in business meetings.* Dr Michael Handford, University of Tokyo. mike@civil.t.u-tokyo.ac.jp.

6. *A critical discourse approach to intercultural communication.* Professor Adrian Holliday: Canterbury Christ Church University. adrian.holliday@canterbury.ac.uk.

The paper presentations will be followed by a roundtable discussion of matters arising involving presenters and the audience.
1. Conceptualising intercultural competence – the need for an applied linguistic approach

Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick. Helen.Spencer-Oatey@warwick.ac.uk.

Conceptualisations of intercultural competence are of fundamental importance in applied linguistics because without a valid framework we cannot meaningfully develop and assess people’s competence in interacting/communicating across cultures. It is surprising, therefore, that despite extensive research and theorising into the nature of communicative competence (e.g. Hymes 1972; Bachman 1990), there has been virtually no applied linguistic research that focuses on the conceptualisation of intercultural competence, despite the inclusion of cultural awareness into many foreign language curricula.

The first part of this paper outlines some well known frameworks of intercultural competence that have been developed in communication studies (e.g. Ting-Toomey 1999) and foreign language education (e.g. Byram 1997; INCA n.d). It argues that despite their strengths, a major weakness of these approaches is the lack of grounding in authentic intercultural interaction data. The descriptions and categories are decontextualised and abstract, and/or lack detailed explication and illustration of communication elements.

The second part of the paper presents a framework that aims to address these weaknesses. Drawing on research into communication strategies (Dörnyei & Scott 1997) and using data collected during a major international collaboration between British and Chinese academics, it proposes a framework that comprises four main clusters of competencies, one of which is communication. The paper uses authentic examples to explain and illustrate the sub-components of the communication cluster and ends by briefly considering the relevance for foreign language teaching.

INCA Project (n.d.) http://www.incaproject.org/
2. Developing and assessing intercultural competence – can dynamic assessment be a way forward?

Dr Claudia Harsch, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick.
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While the importance of intercultural competence (IC) is widely accepted (e.g. Council of Europe 2001), it is surprising that there seems to be very little applied linguistic research into the assessment of IC, let alone any commonly agreed and empirically grounded understanding of how such assessment could be carried out. This paper proposes a dynamic approach to assessing and developing IC.

The paper first gives an evaluative overview of current approaches and instruments for conceptualising and assessing IC in different disciplines: intercultural studies (reviewed by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009), foreign language teaching (e.g. Byram 1997; Scarino 2009), and applied linguistics (Spencer-Oatey and Stadler 2009). On this basis, the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches are discussed.

The paper then proposes a possible way forward: A valid construct of IC needs to encompass aspects of knowledge, participation, language skills and reflective analysis (Scarino 2009). In order to operationalise this into a valid way of effectively assessing IC, dynamic assessment (DA) is suggested. DA provides a graded system of prompts during the assessment, and it can take account of the dynamic nature of IC, promote learning via assessment, and measure the potential for further development (e.g. Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Poehner 2008).

3. “to me it doesn’t matter where [they] come from”.
National culture discourses in the multinational workplace

_Dr Jo Angouri, UWE, Bristol_

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The aim of this paper is to discuss and problematise operationalisations of the concept of _national culture_ in white-collar multinational (MNC) workplaces.

MNCs are often represented as ‘cultureless’ entities that supersede national or political borders. At the same time, ‘culture’—often understood as nationality—has been operationalised as a potential risk or resource related to the ideals of efficiency and effectiveness in MNCs. These values however are ideological and not straightforward economic. As Deetz suggested “concepts of organizational effectiveness tend to hide possible discussion of whose goals should be sought and how much each goal should count” (2003: 26). Gee et al. (1996) also discuss how “allegiance to […] values are […] economic strategies for the business’ benefit” (1996:103).

The paper draws on ethnographic interview data with senior managers in a multinational site and discusses how _national culture_ and _identity_ is perceived in that particular environment. The paper takes a social constructionist standpoint and considers identity not something people _have_ but something they _actively do_ in interaction. The analysis of the data shows the complexity of discourses of ‘national culture and difference’ and foregrounds powerful hegemonic ideologies. Hence the paper closes by a) arguing that narrow conceptualisations of culture do not capture fully the dynamic and political dimension of workplace practices and b) discusses how findings of linguistic work in the field can feedback into IC training and practices.

References:


4. Stereotypes as cultural capital: International students negotiating identities in British HE.

*Trevor Grimshaw Dep. of Education, Univ. of Bath.*

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With increasing transnational mobility, higher education institutions are under pressure to re-evaluate traditional perceptions of international students as a ‘reduced Other’ who is assumed to lack the autonomy and criticality valued by the academy of the Anglophone West (Holliday, 2005). In contrast, instrumental, commercial and accountability ‘How to...’ agendas promote a superficial commodification of ‘intercultural communication’ and ‘awareness’.

The paper will show how ethnographic observation of interdiscourse communication among international students reveals their use of autostereotypes as a resource for impression management. They strategically employ cultural identities as a form of ‘cultural capital’ (cf. Bourdieu, 1992) in order to build relationships, to justify their actions, to obtain leverage, or to generate content for academic assignments. Meanwhile, despite identifying themselves as reflexive and scientifically minded professionals, academic staff often accept uncritically the ‘packaged realities’ that are fed to them by international students, because these confirm established stereotypes and/or because they appeal to their taste for exoticized accounts of the ‘Other’ (cf. ‘academic tourism’). In both cases cultural stereotypes function as tradable commodities.

This reveals the complexity, dynamism and mutability of cultures. The students employ various strategies of self-presentation in order to project different selves, in different contexts, and for a range of purposes.

The findings suggest the need to rethink the use of cultural stereotypes in intercultural training; the marketing of university programmes, wherein the identities of international students are often appropriated for use in promotional materials; and university based research, wherein academics often claim to represent the voices of international students.

References


5. Applying mixed methods in understanding professional intercultural communication: the case of deontic modality in business meetings

Michael Handford, PhD, University of Tokyo.

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In professional communication, culture is often framed in terms of national, professional, and institutional memberships, with particular face concerns, goals, and practices indexing the language employed by the expert members of such communities. Intercultural communication can thus occur between members of such international, interdepartmental and/or interorganizational groups.

In exploring the relationship between text and context in professional discourse, it is important to use as many means as we can in order to ‘see the whole of the elephant’ (Bhatia 2004). This paper analyses discourse from a corpus of authentic business meetings, and proposes that a mixed methods approach allows for a detailed, multifaceted interpretation of professional intercultural communication, combining corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, ethnography, linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, applied linguistics and organisational studies.

This paper demonstrates the application of this methodology through the analysis of several deontic modal verbs in the CANBEC corpus (Cambridge and Nottingham Spoken Business English Corpus), a one million-word corpus comprising mainly business meetings from the UK, continental Europe and Japan (Handford, 2010). The paper will focus on three verbs in particular: need (to), have to, and must. Whereas the first two verbs are positively ‘key’ (Scott, 1997), must is negatively key, that is far less common in business meetings than in everyday talk. By analyzing these items from international, interdepartmental and interorganizational perspectives, several research-based and pedagogical inferences can be drawn.


6. A critical discourse approach to intercultural communication.

Professor Adrian Holliday: Canterbury Christ Church University.
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This paper takes a critical cosmopolitan viewpoint, that our perceptions of culture and intercultural communication are ideological – that a Centre-Western picture of culture, influenced by liberal multiculturalism, imagines a proficient Self and a deficient foreign Other (e.g. Delanty et al 2008). This ideological position extends to the essentialist perception of individualist cultures as always positive and collectivist cultures as always negative. Non-Western cultural realities are thus misrepresented, are relegated to the margins, and remain unrecognised (Hall 1991).

An important role for applied linguistics is therefore to investigate the macro discoursal constructions of ‘intercultural communication’ which govern not only how the cultural realities of individuals are constructed but also how academic and professional groups construct themselves and their theories of culture. This can be applied to texts which engage with culture both in popular and institutional media and within the academy itself. Critical discourse analysis plays an obvious role here.

Revealing ideology through an examination of the discourses of and about culture is also relevant to the development of intercultural awareness and competence (Wallace 2003). This approach transcends the essentialist preoccupation with the line between ‘our culture’ and ‘their culture’. People from diverse cultural backgrounds may usefully pool their insider-outsider experience, thus demonstrating that that share underlying universal abilities in the reading of culture (Holliday forthcoming).


