

Intercultural Communication in the Eastern Cape Similarity versus Variety

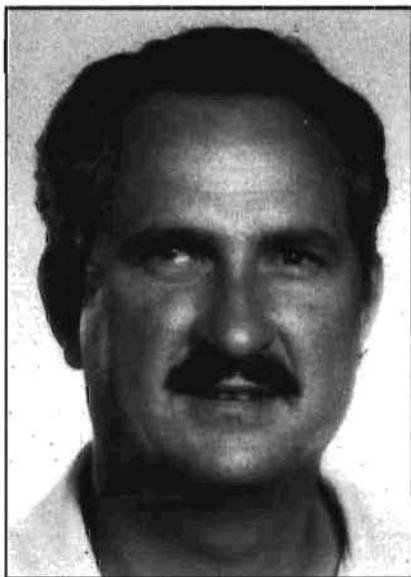
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Language variety is a phenomenon which has enjoyed a great deal of attention in the Republic of South Africa during the past few decades. The aim of this paper is to concentrate more on possible similarities/universals as strategy for improved Black-White communication within the heterogeneous Eastern Cape society of our country. The conclusion is reached that before the above objective can be realized, a greater show of respect for each other's uniqueness must be acquired and more attention must be given to the organizing of discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication encompasses a wide variety of human interactions. It is a very broad and vague term which is used for a variety of linguistic and supralinguistic phenomena, all of which are related to communication between people and culture.

Not only is there a confrontation between different styles of communication, or a degree of mutual intranslatability, but there also exist certain differences in fundamental conceptualizations of community activity. Intercultural communication always develops in situations which can, to a considerable degree, influence both the formal structure of the interaction and



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the symbolic input into the communicative behaviour of the participants involved, as well as the exchange of cultural characteristics between them. It is felt that intercultural communication distinguishes itself as a communication type from others by the fact that culturally different interlocutors interact. The cultural variable should therefore be a crucial element in the analysis.

In the multilingual South African context studies of this nature remain of great

importance and the sociolinguist ought to be continually doing active research in order to gain insight into aspects and problems in this regard. The aim of this article is to concentrate on possible similarities/universalia as strategy for improved Black-White communication within the heterogeneous Eastern Cape labour society where mainly English, Afrikaans and Xhosa is spoken. The findings are based on research done by me as guest researcher of the Human Sciences Research Council.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Pragmatics as point of departure, different approaches to intercultural communication can be taken into consideration. The following attracted my attention as a frame of reference:

The *ethnomethodological* approach promoted by Liberman (1985) and Hinnenkamp (1987) adopts an interactional approach to culture. They are of the opinion that the interlocutor's culture is an incorporated part of his identity as a socially acting human being who will express his culture in his interactions with other human beings, be they from the same cultural background or from a different one. According to Hinnenkamp, this approach may be the best point of departure for empirical investigations. In my opinion, this approach does not seem to be able to account for generalizations which may be necessary when we speak about culture. The way in which groups of people acquire and process the same characteristics in communications and other forms of social behaviour, cannot be reduced to an incorporated aspect of an individual's identity.

The '*cultures collide*' approach, cf. Glenn (1981) and Hofstede (1980), on the other hand, advocates the view that a person's culture will always determine his way of interacting with others. Culture is something beyond the individual. If intercultural conflict takes place, the cultures collide owing to vast cultural differences. This approach seems inadequate be-

cause of the fact that it is implicitly ethnocentric. The internal contradiction is due to the fact that e.g. Whites can overcome communication problems since they "understand" the problems created by the others' uniqueness. Non-Whites seem to be incapable of finding appropriate ways of dealing with such problems, cf. Brislin et al (1986).

Asante, Newmark and Blake (1979) distinguish between two subdisciplines in approaches within the field of intercultural communication, namely *cultural dialogue* and *cultural criticism*. International and humanistic universalia form the foundation of the first approach. International understanding is one of the most important factors involved and out of this originate aspects such as international peace organizations, seminars on intercultural perceptions, religious movements, etc. This school thus attempts to study and promote international communication and therefore falls beyond the frame of this theme. The latter is interested in aspects of conflict between cultures and attempts to identify and highlight these points. Cultural critics are therefore not interested in similarities and universalia between cultures, but only in differences.

This is in my opinion a questionable approach with regard to the South African context. I feel that we must concentrate more on cultural universalia and less on differences. I would say that a study of cultural criticism and identification of distinctive traits and peculiarities must proceed — but in South Africa it has, in my opinion, already been completed to a large extent, especially by the anthropologists. In the sphere of intergroup communication in the Eastern Cape, however, universalia are not easily found.

Over the past ten years or so, much more information about the Xhosa culture has been made available and Whites have become more aware of the differences between the two groups with regard to language, language behaviour, cultural practices, traditions and customs.

Criticism with regard to intercultural

communication is often overemphasized when it concerns cultural differences in communicative behaviour. The result is that an impression of impossibility of communication is created — but this is only partially correct. Conflict between cultures often revolves around the use or misuse of existing norms of intercultural communication. The culturally-bound differences in communicative behaviour and the conceptualization of communication itself apparently appear to be so great that fruitful dialogue often appears to be excluded *a priori*.

The culturally-bound differences in communicative behaviour must not be ignored or underestimated, but it appears to me as though cultural difference/ethnicity is so often overemphasized that similarities/ universalia are overlooked. Intercultural communication must guard against ethnocentricity and one must attempt instead to rewrite and analyse the intercultural communicative process. I shall from here on attempt to concentrate more on similarities-/universalia.

CULTURE, NORM AND INTER-ACTION/TOLERANCE

Before the theme of intercultural communication can be proceeded with, the above terms must be more narrowly defined. It is noticeable how often conflicts between language/cultural groups can be attributed to disputes regarding norms. One of the parties, often the dominant party, interprets the communicative behaviour of the other group as unsuitable according to the norms/rules of the dominant group. Consequently conflict arises, resulting in the language/cultural differences being regarded as obstacles to successful communication. Conflict is therefore often attributed to the cultural advantage or disadvantage of a specific group and, through this, attention is drawn away from the actual conflict. In other words, the communication conflict

is linked to features of the communicative style of one of the integrating groups. Accordingly two reservations arise:

- (a) Contravention of the norm is based on a presupposition of the concept norm.
- (b) Actual cultural differences are deliberately ignored.

In the case of the Eastern Cape it appears to me as though the latter instance is overemphasized — in other words, we have been concentrating on this for too long and too intensively, resulting in universalia often being overlooked. In the case of (a) above, we are perhaps even more guilty. To me it is therefore essential for us to focus more on language-cultural similarities. Tackling a theme of this nature ought to be interdisciplinary in nature and socio-linguistics and anthropology should play a decisive role.

Unfortunately few theoretical frames of reference for a theme of this nature exist; although a very vague reflection of this may be found in European society. (Compare my visit to Europe during September–October 1988). Experts are to an ever-increasing degree advocating unity in spite of variety. For example Van Spaandonck, a sociolinguist and African linguist from Belgium, delivered a lecture in Frankfurt (Germany) on intercultural interactions within commercial bank contexts in Europe, i.e. lines of thought pointing to the theme 'Europe 1992'. (The latter concerns a combined effort by mainly the EEC countries to seek greater unity within the European diversity, especially in spheres such as language use, economics, education, defence, communication and social work.)

Recently many foreign sociolinguists have in their theoretical considerations began operating particularly within a cultural frame of reference, whether they are aware or unaware of linguistic variety. For example then, Scollon and Scollon (1981) deal with the following themes:

DISCRIMINATION AS A COMMUNICATION PROBLEM

The Alaskan Legislative Council, for example, found in 1978 that Blacks were given longer explanations in court than Whites. The difference in syntactic approach can be ascribed to different communicative patterns and ways of stating one's case more clearly. Concerning Xhosa, in tribal courts the whole case is first laid down before the criminal and then he is asked to plead: *Uyalivuma na ityala?* 'Do you agree that you are guilty?' In European courts, he is asked to plead innocent or guilty right at the beginning before the case has been laid down. The Alaskan Council also found that the so-called "higher" language of teaching staff has a discriminating effect on the comprehension of Black school pupils. Courts and schools ought to keep the mother tongue of those concerned, even if it is a variant of English, in mind when they communicate or lecture. The same argument should also be applied to all social, economic and teaching contexts of society. Many misunderstandings between population groups arise mainly as a result of fundamental differences in cultural values and different codes of speech.

COMMUNICATIVE STYLE

A lack of knowledge regarding the communicative style of especially minority groups can also give rise to many communicative misunderstandings. Personal communicative interactions are, as a rule, complicated. Communicative style often finds expression in body language of typical clothing. Also for example, the style of narration can be an important aspect with regard to communicative understanding. We often find that a personal narrative style is adopted in order to influence the addressee, for example a sympathetic style (also in body language), etc.

In the Eastern Cape community there are various styles of communication which characterise Black people and

White people. However, the Whites have imposed many of their cultural and social practices on the Xhosas and in many cases they have adopted these. Therefore so many similarities do exist in Black and White communicative styles, e.g. it is regarded as rude to interrupt another person while he is telling/explaining something. Both cultures accept this. Another example of communicative similarity in style which finds expression in body language is that it is regarded as impolite to fold one's arms while talking to one's superior — both cultures agree to this. Many similarities also exist in the accepted behaviour of women in Black and White societies, e.g. the way women sit conveys a certain non-verbal message.

Concerning style of narration Xhosas tend to be very dramatic, creative and imaginative when narrating an event/story. They get absolutely carried away by the sheer beauty of certain words and phrases and often repeat them. Blacks also place much emphasis on certain words and sometimes over-dramatise for effect, e.g. their Praise-Poetry, *Imbongi*.

DISCOURSE, EYE CONTACT AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS

It may be accepted that many misunderstandings are based upon the difference in the organizing of discourse, of eye contact or of the whole cadre of politeness. The latter is regarded as the basis of successful communication. All discourse patterns of narrative style are actually patterns encompassing the whole expression of interactional face-to-face contact. Xhosas generally (because of the traditional tribal set-up) regard humility as very important. They strive to act humbly at all times and this is evident in their speech. E.g. when greeting a White, the Xhosa man will ask how he is, his health, his family and organise his thoughts around the central issue. If a Xhosa man

wants to ask about something, he avoids a direct question. In Xhosa culture it is regarded as rude to come straight to the point. Whites do this quite easily.

Concerning eye movement, for example, the practice of rolling the eyes and of avoidance of eye contact are common to Xhosas and are subjected to different uses than those of whites. Rolling of the eyes by Xhosas is a nonverbal means of communicating impudence and disapproval of the person in the authority role and is carried out by moving the eyes from one side of the eye socket to the other and lowering the eyelids.

With Western Culture, a forthright person has a firm handshake and looks you directly in the eye. Unfortunately, Whites think that it is a sign of weakness when the Xhosas lower their eyes and they undeservedly gain the reputation of being weak or guilty whereas they are only intending to be polite.

When a Xhosa walks into a room full of strange, unfamiliar faces, he will greet all by saying *Molweni, Ninjan?* Good morning, how are you?" It is regarded as polite — Xhosas generally greet everyone. Whites only tend to greet if they know the specific person or when they are introduced.

Another example of difference in etiquette is: When Xhosas enter another Xhosa's house, they automatically sit down without being told to *Khawuhlale phantsi*, 'please sit down.' In a White home, the host invites the guest in and the guest will stand until the host says: Please sit down/have a seat". This practice could be confusing since the Xhosa might think the White doesn't want him to sit down, or the White will think the Xhosa "forward" if he just sits down.

Typical preferences and general etiquette systems occur universally in specific social contexts of different cultures. When intergroup communication is studied, the differences in social systems must therefore be kept in mind. It will be realised for example, that reform/change in the South African socio-political con-

text cannot progress satisfactorily if communication is not based upon multilateral interactions.

INTERGROUP COMMUNICATION IN THE EASTERN CAPE

It is common knowledge that misunderstandings and conflict between different population groups occur daily (compare Kruger 1982, 1984). Political, social and economic changes have made it imperative that differences and similarities are discussed more explicitly. Conflict and misunderstandings are often a source of frustration for developing groups because they feel that their interests are overlooked or not understood. Conversely the same applies. Developed groups are, for the same reasons, just as frustrated. As these frustrations increase, stereotypes arise in both parties and stereotyping is not conducive to harmonious relations.

LANGUAGE USE, GRAMMAR AND DISCOURSE

The more recent findings of sociolinguists are that language use as such does not really influence or impede dialogue, but that it is rather the discourse system of the language which causes the problems (compare Gumperz 1977 and Gumperz en Roberts 1978).

It is the way in which ideas are put together in an argument, the way in which ideas are selected for specific emphasis and impact and the way in which emotional information concerning ideas is conveyed, which generates misunderstanding as well as conflict. The grammatical system does convey the basic message, but is especially the discourse which determines the way in which the message must be interpreted. Grammar remains the instrument of communication, but discourse causes the modification for interpretation.

According to Scollon and Scollon (1981) specific discourse systems are already learnt during childhood and even before the child can speak. These sys-

tems are learnt through long and intensive processes of socialization and communication, firstly on the mother's knee and later through education and from other leading figures in society. This happens subconsciously and affects all forms of communication and is closely related to specific individual concepts of identity. Any change in discourse systems is often seen as a change in personality and cultural uniqueness.

DISCOURSE ADAPTATION

SELF IMAGE

Engaging in conversation is one of the most important means whereby we impress our attitudes/(self)image upon other people. We see it as our opportunity or even our right to state our side of the case and to inform the addressee of our own position (in life). Compare for example the different 'faces which I can put on' with regard to communication with my wife, my children, my students, my friends and my subordinates.

SILENCE VERSUS VERBOSITY

During Black-White communicative interactions in the Eastern Cape context, it is often found that Xhosas are less verbose than Whites. Naturally this does not refer to Xhosas in everyday conversational situations; amongst themselves they are equally verbose. Their silence is a consequence of different factors of which showing of respect toward seniors or superiors is one of the most important. However, if we are not familiar with the reasons for these communication patterns, we can easily make generalizations which can later be typified as stereotypes — and as mentioned earlier, this can be dangerous for harmonious communication and intercultural contact.

DOMINATING SOCIAL RELATIONS

Another important aspect is the power of relations between speakers. As men-

tioned above we act differently towards, for example, our children, people of other cultural groups, etc. The difference is often a consequence of different dimensions of seniority and superiority. For example, for many decades Whites have been the dominant group in the Eastern Cape context. However, in the last few decades, things have changed. The change was not easy because the Whites have for so long been the dominant group, that it is sociologically and psychologically difficult for Xhosas to change from the role of subordinate — the White wants the Xhosa to act more independently, but he cannot and is even incapable thereof because such changes takes time. The White, in turn, becomes impatient and typecasts the Xhosa as "not wanting to" be uplifted. Such stereotypes ought to be avoided if intercultural communication is to be advanced.

CONVERSATION VARIATION

When two people begin to converse, it requires a great deal of coordination to initiate the conversation and to maintain a smooth flow thereafter. Good conversational cooperation requires hard work and concentration. The following are some of the most important preconditions for harmonious dialogue:

INTRODUCTORY AND CONCLUDING FORMULAS

Introductory and concluding formulas differ from culture to culture. For example the Black has a long and extended introductory pattern. The white, on the other hand, is more concise and normally wishes to get to the point as quickly as possible. The concluding formulas can also be a source of conflict. Here for example, the concluding formula of the Xhosa often implies the possibility that the conversation will be continued in the future. Compare for example Xhosa *ndiza kukubona*. 'I shall see you (again)/Goodbye.' The White can misinterpret the expression by thinking that the

Xhosa does not wish to continue the conversation and thus regards the conversation as having been completed.

TURN-TAKING AND CONTROLLING THE THEME

Research has shown that it is the initiator who dominates the subject. In fact he is merely requesting the right to speak from the second person; of the latter a comment is required from time to time. Should the second person wish to introduce his own topic, he must wait until that of the first person has been completed. These rules concerning conversation initiation may appear to be of little consequence, but nevertheless they are important in everyday communication.

Problems often arise when two speakers have differing systems of pauses between utterances. Normally the Xhosa have longer pauses than Whites. The result is that the White then thinks that the Xhosa has no more to say (it is now his turn) and he continues normally with the conversation. In this way the White dominates the situation completely.

INFORMATION STRUCTURE

Information structure deals with the question of how conversation can be engaged in meaningfully. When two people speak the same language, linguistic misunderstandings are relatively few. A problem however arises when one of the participants is not using his mother tongue, but is compelled to use a second or even a third language. When a person speaks and we bear knowledge of his linguistic as well as his extralinguistic discourse system, we can for example easily judge whether he wishes to continue with the conversation or not; or whether he is making a statement or posing a question; or whether he wishes to emphasize something or even what his body language is communicating.

ETHNIC STEREOTYPES

I have thus far tried to indicate which fac-

tors could be involved in Black-White intercultural communication. The following step is to examine those features which can possibly be the cause of everyday intercultural conflict. A list of points serving as personal or social indicators can be drawn up. The following may serve as examples:

Factors which confuse Whites in communication with Xhosas:

- Xhosas do not easily speak; they normally keep silent.
- They deliberately avoid conversation situations.
- They will only speak in order to end the conversation.
- They underestimate their own capabilities.
- They normally expect that matters must be clearly spelt out to them.
- They normally expect instructions.
- They avoid direct questions.
- They never initiate a conversation.
- They do not adhere to the topic.
- They do not speak about themselves.
- They will always answer a question affirmatively, e.g. 'Yes Sir'.
- They are unnecessarily loud.
- They do not look you in the eye when they speak to you.

Factors which confuse Xhosas:

- Whites are too verbose.
- They always speak first.
- They show no respect.
- They think they can predict the future.
- They always speak about what will still happen.
- They ask too many questions.
- They only speak about that which interests them.
- They do not give the other the opportunity to speak.

All the above points relate to the discourse process and their elimination could be a good starting point for the normalization of intercultural communication. Such expressions quickly develop into cultural/ethnic stereotypes. If we in any

way wish to alter stereotypical discourse patterns, we must also try to change our own personal attitudes. Such a change implies that in everyday conversation, one must keep to one's own culture but strive to associate more with the other. However, changing of specific cultural patterns is a tedious process. The disregarding of this process is what actually causes misunderstandings and conflict. Should we thus strive to gain a better understanding of one another, we must take careful heed of cultural uniqueness and display a mutual show of respect.

DISCOURSE AS POLITENESS PHENOMENON

Within a Black-White communicative context, productive systems of cultural behaviour are the result of interactions of human universalia as well as specific cultural inputs by specific groups. We take it for granted that universal as well as specific features can be found in all groups. We must, however, attempt to identify and determine both of these features. In order to find similarities, the focus must fall on language as well as cultural universalia — and this is no easy task, especially in a society with a multicultural composition of groups. The most obvious starting point would appear to be universalia as regards self-image, seeing that every person has a personal image with regard to himself. What does vary from system to system, however, is the natural tendency to attach values to differing aspects of (self)image in specific groups. The set of (self)image universalia determines different communicative strategies, for both speaker and listener.

UNIVERSALS OF LANGUAGE USE

It is a common phenomenon that linguistic universalia exist between languages and we provisionally leave it at that. With regard to extra-linguistic universalia, we would however like to say more. Brown and Levison (1978) indicated that more or less the same forms of politeness or

politeness strategies occur in different population groups. The basic assumption is that any image created is correlated to a person's (self)image and this normally consists of two aspects, namely a positive and a negative aspect. The term 'negative' is used when a person withdraws from the public or social world. 'Positive', on the other hand, is used with regard to a positive approach to the social sphere. In all communicative interactions a reasonable balance between positive and negative ought to be generated and both parties ought to strive toward this. In order to carry this out successfully, mutual respect for the image of one another ought to be shown. Should this not be done, interactional communication would be in danger of breaking down. Very often a Xhosa gives you an answer that he thinks you want to hear, rather than the accurate information. Also, he evades certain issues if he feels unsure or uneasy and very often he tells lies to get out of a tricky situation.

Some utterances have a greater chance of damaging a person's (self)image than others. Therefore careful thought must be given to language utterances which could possibly hurt another. For this reason, attention must be given to the following:

COMMUNICATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

The following are factors which can influence the (self)image, deliberately or unintentionally:

Solidarity

- (a) To the point/factual
- (b) Positive politeness
- (c) Negative politeness

Misunderstanding/Conflict

- (d) Vagueness/evasiveness
- (e) Off the point

The first two aspects are normally not confusing and are explicit. The remainder on the other hand, cause confusion, mis-

understanding and conflict. 'Vagueness' under (b) above, is one of the most dangerous factors in the sense that it can generate contradictions and misunderstandings. The consequence of a vague utterance can be differing interpretations and, as a result, misunderstanding.

Some of the most important aspects normally brought about by positive attitude/image during the communication process are the following:

- (a) A show of interest in the listener's interests, needs and objectives.
- (b) Sympathy with the listener.
- (c) Group association with the listener.
- (d) Empathy with the listener's opinions and knowledge.
- (e) Acceptance of the listener's uniqueness.

The above are natural grounds for a positive attitude which are normally present with both the speaker and listener of any group. It is thus obvious that both will bear these common factors/universalia in mind for the promotion of communicative interaction. A negative attitude on the other hand occurs when the listener's negative image is addressed. This can be the result of the following:

- (a) Minimal attention to the listener's needs and desires.
- (b) Not giving the listener the opportunity to react.
- (c) Lack of attempts made to minimize tension.
- (d) Through not apologizing when required to do so.
- (e) Dissociation
- (f) Through regarding difference (e.g. in culture) as the general rule.

POLITENESS SYSTEMS

It is common knowledge that different groups such as professionals, adolescents, certain labour groups, etc. have

specific internal features with regard to their interactional politeness patterns. It has already been mentioned above that it can be accepted that general/universal patterns/systems relating to positive or negative politeness can be identified. In order to characterize universal systems of politeness, the terms 'positive' and 'negative' politeness can also be replaced with the terms 'solid' and 'unique' politeness. The former thus emphasizes similarity, whereas the latter refers to differences. Avoiding presuppositions with regard to each other, will not only emphasize the solid politeness image of the listener, but also his positive (self)image. Solid politeness systems lead to positive feedback and this promotes harmonious intercultural communication.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One can come to the conclusion that politeness and showing of respect are among the most important extralinguistic universalia on which we can concentrate in order to generate good intercommunicative relations between different groups. In order to reach these goals, language as an instrument must be implemented in a special way — and this brings us to the most important linguistic factor, namely discourse. Well-thought utterances will consciously have to be made continually in order to bring about the necessary changes in discourse and differences in style. Sympathy and empathy with the addressee's unique cultural pattern should always be a priority. Such an approach will however require considerable concentration, patience and understanding on the part of both participants. One of the main goals of the sociolinguist will thus have to be finding more common aspects of language and cultural universalia. In this way we may become aware of more aspects of similarity, notwithstanding great variety.

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