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Ein Quantum Kompetenz
Interkulturalität zwischen Ost und West

Quantum of competence
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Intercultural Competence for Unequal Business Encounters

[Interkulturelle Kompetenz für Asymmetrische Geschäftsbeziehungen]

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Abstract [English]

The article treats the issue of teaching intercultural competence in courses organised by business enterprises for their employees. It is proposed that more scholarly attention should be devoted to the commodity character of intercultural training that enforces its adaptation to the market's demands. The idealised academic view of such training as happening under conditions unaffected by power relations needs to be replaced with a more realistic picture of power imbalance, fuelling the concept of cultural superiority on the part of the economically stronger party. Methods are suggested for reducing such an ethnocentric bias. Besides, the article indicates the ways in which the training might be used to subtly and tactfully raise the awareness of problems resulting from asymmetrical adaptation of the economically weaker party to the linguistic requirements of the stronger partner.

Keywords: business, coaching, inequality, power, language

Abstract [Deutsch]

Der Aufsatz thematisiert die Problematik von Schulungen interkultureller Kompetenz in der freien Wirtschaft. Solche Schulungen finden oft im Kontext eines wirtschaftlichen Machgefälles zwischen dem Investor und der Tochtergesellschaft statt, was in akademischen Erwägungen außer Acht gelassen wird. Ein kultureller Relativismus ist von den Teilnehmern nicht zu erwarten. Stattdessen wird die Machtasymmetrie von der stärkeren Partei als die Konsequenz der kulturellen Unterschiede interpretiert, d.h. als ein sichtbarer Beweis für den höheren Nutzwert der eigenen Kultur. Asymmetrische sprachliche Anpassung von der Tochtergesellschaft an den Investor wird ebenfalls unreflektiert akzeptiert. Der Aufsatz deutet an, wie ethnozentrische Interpretation von kulturellen Unterschieden gemildert und eine sprachbezogene Reflexion herbeigeführt werden kann. Dabei muss stets beachtet werden, dass dies potentiell in Opposition zu den pragmatischen Interessen des Dozenten steht und sein professionelles Image gefährden kann.

Stichworte: Wirtschaft, Coaching, Machtgefälle, Sprache, Dominanz

1. Introduction

Wilson and Wilson (2001) noted that while much of intercultural communication research and training rests on the presumption that the key to intercultural communication and understanding is the knowledge of the relevant culture, an essential piece is missing from this perspective: the consideration of power relations. Indeed, it seems that the idealised view of intercultural training as happening under conditions unaffected by power relations should be replaced with a more realistic picture of power imbalance that fuels the concept of cultural superiority on the part of the economically stronger party. In what follows, methods are presented that are claimed to be useful in reducing such an ethnocentric bias. At the same time, it is proposed that more attention should be paid to the commodity character of intercultural training that enforces its adaptation to the market's demands, informed first of all by the customers' economically-oriented objectives. Thus, an IC instructor is sometimes caught in a vulnerable position, between conflicting incentives resulting from his/her position as an insider of the "weaker" society in the intercultural encounter on the one hand, and his/her economic dependence on the fulfilment of the customer's expectations on the other.

In what follows proposals are made for taking the inequality issue into account when teaching intercultural competence for business encounters, in courses that are offered as a component of professional training in business and commerce operating across national borders. This has two essential aspects which will be discussed in their logical order: the cultural superiority view (which is non-linguistic), and the linguistic issue of language proficiency and language choice.

The outsourcing of production to countries offering lower cost of labour and lower taxes leads to commercial and business ventures in which three main economic assets - capital, technology, and knowledge - flow from highly developed countries to weaker partners and daughter companies, creating the conditions of unequal encounters. In such encounters, the power is with the investing party, who dictate the rules of the game. Frequently enough, a training of intercultural competence is offered to the employees, sometimes only in the investor's country/mother company. In that case, the objective is to prepare the members of the stronger partner to successfully and efficiently communicate with the less advanced. The training is expected to inform the members of a business unit of the cultural specificity of the Other, and an unfamiliar set of communicative principles based on a hierarchy of societal values that differs in many respects from the one that has been internalised and is taken for granted.

2. Hierarchical interpretations of cultural distance

As a rule, a course in intercultural competence for the employees of a business enterprise is meant to give them an orientation in dealing with members of a particular foreign culture. The trainer's task is to present the range of cultural differences and provide specific knowledge about a particular culture of the partner country, rather than share universal deliberations and insights. The course participants seldom bring in strong educational background in human sciences. The evaluation of the professionalism of the coach (which decides his/her chance of being re-hired) and the value of the training depends largely on the degree to which the trainees feel that the course has prepared them precisely for surprise-free communication with people from a particular partner country. The time allocated to such trainings is very limited and rarely exceeds three days. These factors explain why the practical handbooks of intercultural competence and training curricula worked out by trainers typically focus on contrasts between particular two cultures and do not offer much space to general explanations, which are predominant in more general and more scholarly courses found in higher education. In academic courses, parameters of social and cultural differences identified by social psychologists and anthropologists are dealt with extensively, and the differences between particular two cultures are analysed against the background of this theoretical knowledge, which is viewed as the more essential aspect of learning. In non-academic business courses, with their focus on two particular cultures and practical, operational objectives, general explanations pertaining to parameters of difference such as individualism and collectivism, high and low social distance, monochronony and polychrony, low and high context are offered only as pendants to the specific knowledge about a specific partner (cf. also practical handbooks such as e.g. Schroll-Machl 2001, 2003, Schroll-Machl / Wiskoski 2003, Schmid 2002).

This has two immediate disadvantages. The first of them is the limitation of the cognitive gain, which means that even if the training may prepare the participants for current communicative tasks, it equips them only poorly for crossing different borders, that is, for further experience-guided learning on their own in different constellations. Secondly, it holds an imminent danger of misattribution whenever such trainings take place in the context of inequality in economic and technological spheres. The more powerful party frequently tend to interpret cultural difference as a source and, at the same time, an effect of the difference in achievement – and, thus, an indicator of the lower value of the partner's cultural make-up.

This results in the impression on the part of the members of the stronger partner that the future shape of the intercultural encounter should be guided by the partner's gradual shift towards their own set of principles and values. Such a change is conceived as the measure of progress prerequisite to sharing in the economic success and general social advancement. To put it briefly, the degree of cultural difference from "me, now" is viewed by the more powerful as a measure of inferiority. This belief encompasses several simple ideas: that cultural differences between two societies measure the level of civilisation they achieved; that "they" are different from us because they are not "so far" yet; and that "they" will become like "us" when they have learned enough (from "us"), which is due to happen as an effect of the long-time interaction – which "we" are going to control.

Paradoxically, the intercultural training itself, in particular in view of the fact that it is being offered more frequently to (a greater number of) employees in the daughter company, turns into one of the means of remaining in control.

A distance between two countries on a given "parameter" (cf. Hofstede 1980, 1991) of culture is unlikely to be misconceived as a measure of the utilitarian value of each of the respective attitudes when the task focus is on ordering and systematising a *heterogeneous set* of countries that are *similar* in one respect and *different* in another, and when this set includes *both prosperous and economically weak countries*. The two countries on which the training focuses should be presented as just two among many (cf. Pułaczewska 2010). As suggested at the beginning, the misconception "they will become like us" relies on the underlying assumption that there exists a rather universal path to modernity; and that all countries need to follow it on their way to technological (and social) advancement – becoming, for example, increasingly more monochronic, more specific, less contextual, and less indirect than the Czechs and closer to the Germans as time goes by and economy grows. In an attempt of uncoupling cultural similarity (or distance) from achievement (or its lack), Japan comes in handy as a country very different from both Western Europe and North America (e.g. Japan is low on directness and high on context-dependence) in matters of culture but high in the hierarchy of economic power and technological progress.

It is recommendable that the dissociation of cultural similarity and similarity in economic achievement is introduced covertly, without visibly pre-supposing negative attitudes to the interaction patterns of the weaker partner on the part of the course participants. Also, an overt insistence on cultural relativism on the trainer's part should be avoided. It can be evaluated as pushy and biased in particular if the trainer is perceived as a member of the weaker partner's culture.

3. Linguistic competence and language choice

One of the central issues in communication under conditions of unequal enounter is the language used. Paradoxically enough, language is typically being downplayed or ignored by comparative social psychologists in studies of intercultural communication and its failures. In such studies on international industrial and business communication, the linguistic forms used in communication are viewed as a merely peripheral, surface manifestation of different norms and values; it is the latter that are believed to cause communicative tensions and disturbances. The fact that both parties differ in their linguistic competence, sometimes to the extent that only one party in the encounter uses a foreign language (typically, the daughter company, i.e. the economically weaker partner), while the other party consists of native and near-native speakers, is disregarded. The lack of linguistic competence is an issue for language pedagogy, which deals with the linguistic component of intercultural communication by its very nature – both as a subject of theoretical reflection and in the applied sense. Culturally conditioned thinking habits on the one hand, and linguistic proficiency on the other, are kept cleanly apart; linguistic competence is something to be dealt with in a language course, not in courses on intercultural competence. In the latter, when role-plays are conducted in linguistically homogeneous groups simulating contacts with foreign business partners, the participants' mother tongue is typically used even if the actual business contacts take place in a foreign language.

While this clean division of labour between a language course and a course on culture has some practical merits, intercultural training should deal with language insofar as the problem of language deficiency touches upon social issues with which language courses are not even remotely concerned: the difference in power and its social and communicative consequences.

The way in which a training of intercultural competence can interact with the issue of language use is through raising the awareness of the effects of linguistic discrepancy upon the social aspects of the encounter. These effects can be roughly differentiated into two interrelated factors, both rooted – to put it briefly – in the less proficient speakers being less able to make visible their professionalism, social skills and personality.

The first factor is the influence of foreign language skills in the inferior party's group upon the relationship within this group, including intergroup power relations. An example of how in a business setting some group members can gain prominence alone by way of having superior foreign language skills is given in San Antonio (1987). Also Kim and Paulk (1994) analyse the role of language proficiency in informal group structuring and Knapp (2002) analyses the "fading out of the non-native speaker" in communication with native and more proficient near-native speakers in an organisational setting.

The second, more essential issue is the contribution of the linguistic component into the inequality of the encounter whenever the investing party/mother company speak their own language and the receiving party do not. Nekula (2002) and Nekula et al. (2005) in German-Czech plants in the Czech Republic showed that using the employer's language (German) affected badly the attitudes of Czech employees to the employer and were a cause of resentments, while the so-called symmetrical adaptation with both parties using lingua franca English produced the opposite effect. While the international dominance of English has been subject to harsh criticism as tantamount to linguicide (cf. e.g. Tsuda 1998), these studies show that availability of English as a lingua franca also can contribute to re-constituting unequal relationships in a way more satisfactory to the weaker party.

The functions of intercultural training do not include influencing strategic decision-making on issues such as the choice of language for international intra-company communication, and consultation on this issue is not asked for in such courses. In fact, an overt attempt to transgress the usual frame and offer ideological indoctrination instead of staying focused on the expected and paid-for contents (i.e., cultural differences) might even provoke a remedial action on the part of the senior stuff present in the course, an event that poses a severe threat to the instructor's professional "face". However, the instructor who wishes to address the relation between language choice and inequality, as well as suggest alternative solutions, can opt for a covert way of inducing reflection in the course participants. This can be done e.g. through job-related role-plays conducted in a foreign language. Another possibility is to use role-plays in which the issue of language choice is introduced as a controversial agenda for a discussion in a simulated work meeting, with a different task in focus – such as practicing some culture-dependent negotiation strategies. Such reflection is not likely to occur spontaneously because, for the people involved, asymmetrical adaptation looks just common sense, given the asymmetry in the relationship.

4. Final remarks

While overtly stressing the power distance between two parties to a business encounter would be both "politically incorrect" and tactless, i.e. face-threatening to both sides alike, there is little use in the coaches pretending to themselves that communication for which they are supposed to prepare their short-time trainees is going to take place in a power vacuum. It would be equally mistaken to presuppose an openness to value relativism (which few people really embrace) on the part of the course participants. However, before methods are developed to address the inequality issue on a pragmatic level, i.e. in teaching intercultural competence, the current deficit in theoretical reflection needs to get reduced. Intercultural (business) encounters and unequal ones coincide with each other frequently, and it should not be ignored in theoretical inputs to the pedagogy of intercultural communication.

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