

1 Intercultural Communication: An Overview¹

INGRID PILLER

Introduction

This chapter is intended to serve as an overview of intercultural communication studies by introducing key issues and assumptions, describing some of the major studies in the field, and pointing out problematic aspects. Traditionally, intercultural communication studies have been most widely understood as comprising studies, whether of a comparative or an interactional nature, that take cultural group membership as a given. This predominant essentialism makes intercultural communication studies an exception in the social sciences, where social constructionist approaches have become the preferred framework in studies of identity (Piller 2011). Rather than taking culture and identity as given, social constructionism insists that it is linguistic and social practices that bring culture and identity into being (Burr 2003). The essentialist assumption that people belong to a culture or have a culture, which is typically taken as a given in intercultural communication studies, has given the field a somewhat old-fashioned, dowdy, not-quite-with-it, even reactionary image, an image which one recent commentator describes as follows:

To many teachers and researchers working . . . under the broad designation of media and cultural studies, the subfield of "intercultural communication" might seem a bit suspect. . . . there is a legacy of rather functionalist and technicist tendencies in the background, a legacy that has had its impact upon the intellectual quality of many areas of 'communications' research.

(Corner 2006: 155–6)

Given the frequency with which intercultural communication, usually in the form of "culture A, B or C" and "cultural difference," is invoked in a wide range of

discourses, I consider the reluctance of (critical) academics to get involved in intercultural communication research problematic. Therefore, this chapter also makes a case for an empirical and critical enquiry into intercultural communication, which simultaneously narrows and widens the scope of the field. The scope needs to be narrowed to distinguish linguistic issues from “cultural” issues, and it needs to be widened to distinguish “cultural” issues from those where talk about “culture” serves to obscure inequality between and within groups. Throughout, I will ask how “intercultural communication” has become one of the key terms (in the sense of Bennett et al. 2005; Williams 1976) of late modernity (i.e. who invokes “culture” when, where, how, and for what purposes).

“Having a Culture”

Each year, I begin my university course on intercultural communication with the question “What do you expect to learn in this class?”, and each year students will tell me that they want to learn how people from different cultures communicate or how misunderstandings between cultures can be avoided. These understandings are in line with textbook definitions such as these: “a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people of different cultures” (Gudykunst and Kim 2002: 14) or “the exchange of information between individuals who are unlike culturally” (Rogers and Steinfatt 1999: 1). What the student expectations, the textbook definitions – and maybe your reader expectations? – have in common is the implicit assumption that people somehow have culture (to be of a culture) and that they somehow are culturally different or similar to others. The next question I ask my new students is usually something along the lines, “So, what is your culture?”, and at the University of Sydney in Australia where I have done this exercise most often, I typically get a few straightforward answers like “I’m Australian” or “I’m Chinese,” some also relatively straightforward but combinatorial answers like “I’m Vietnamese-Australian” or “I’m Chinese from Singapore,” and a fair number of people who struggle to answer the question, as in this response: “Well, I don’t know, my mother is from Austria, my father from Japan, and I was born in New Zealand but I’ve grown up here.” While these answers exhibit different levels of complexity, they have one thing in common: culture is taken to be a national and/or ethnic category in all of them. Again, the students’ usage of “culture” as more or less coterminous with “nation” and/or “ethnicity” is mirrored in most academic work, where the following examples – titles of papers in two widely used readers in the field – can be considered typical: “Conflict management in Thai organizations” (Rojjanaprayon et al. 2004), “What is the basis of American culture” (Aldridge 2004), “The Chinese conceptualizations of face: emotions, communication, and personhood” (Jia 2003) or “Communication with Egyptians” (Begley 2003). Thus, there is clear evidence that culture is widely understood as nation and/or ethnicity, even if the readers I have just mentioned, along with most other textbooks in the field, also tend to include, albeit to a much smaller degree, cultures that are not nation- nor ethnicity-based, such as faith-based cultures (Chuang 2004; Irani

2004), gender-based cultures (Tannen 1990; Wood and Reich 2003; Mulvaney 2004) or sexuality-based cultures (Bronski 2003; Thurlow 2004). Whether culture is viewed as nation, as ethnicity, as faith, as gender, or as sexuality, all these “cultures” have one thing in common: they are imagined communities (Anderson 1991). That means that members of a culture imagine themselves and are imagined by others as group members. These groups are too large to be “real” groups (i.e. no group member will ever know all the other group members). Therefore, they are best considered as discursive constructions. That means that we do not have culture but that we construct culture discursively. In the examples I quoted above, “culture” is constructed as a static, internally homogeneous entity different from other such entities (i.e. it is reified and essentialized). As I pointed out above, this understanding of culture as a discursive construction is not widely used in the field of intercultural communication studies, where essentialist understandings predominate. I consider the following definition of “culture” to be typical for the field:

[C]ulture is ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex, and pervasive. Because culture is so broad, there is no single definition or central theory of what it is. Definitions range from the all-encompassing (‘it is everything’) to the narrow (‘it is opera, art, and ballet’). For our purposes we define culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

(Samovar and Porter 2003: 8)

This definition is typical in a number of ways: first, it goes to great lengths to stress the complexity of “culture”; second, it is at pains to acknowledge the diversity of definitions of “culture”; and third, it links “culture” to group membership. In a way, such definitions are hard to disagree with: it is obvious that culture is somehow tied to group membership, it is undisputable that culture is complex, and, given that people have been thinking about culture and group membership for millennia, probably since the dawn of time, it is also clear that different thinkers have come up with a great many different understandings. Unfortunately, however, from a research perspective a definition of “culture” as “complex, differently defined, and tied to group membership” is useless because it cannot be operationalized. That means that it cannot be studied empirically and culture becomes an a priori assumption. In contrast, anthropologists and sociologists insist that belonging to culture A, B, or C can never be an a priori assumption: “Ethnographers’ uses of the word culture have established one essential point of consensus: culture is not a real thing, but an abstract and purely analytical notion. It does not cause behavior, but summarizes an abstraction from it, and is thus neither normative nor predictive” (Baumann 1996: 11). Because many writers in intercultural communication do not heed this basic point, they end up using the term “culture” as if it were coterminous with “nation” and/or “ethnicity” (e.g., “Thai,” “American,” “Chinese,” or “Egyptian” in the examples above). If researchers use predefined cultural categories that are salient to them

as the basis for their investigations, they can only reproduce the discourses available to them (i.e. those circulating in society at large), rather than analyzing those discourses critically. It is therefore unsurprising that culture oftentimes gets equated with nation and/or ethnicity, because the discourses of national identity and national belonging are powerful ones that have been around for a considerable period and are powerfully supported by a range of state, media, and other institutional practices.

Let me provide some examples: at the time of writing the original version of this chapter, I lived in Basel, a Swiss city that borders France and Germany. Mundane activities such as grocery shopping (cheaper in Germany) or attending a children's birthday party (school friends of my child living in France) reminded me of national borders on an almost daily basis. They also reminded me of, and inscribed, my identity as a German citizen because this was the passport I carried, and this was the passport I had not to forget to put in my car in case I was checked as I crossed one of those borders. Furthermore, in comparison to an Indian friend of mine, these reminders and ascriptions of my national identity were relatively benign: Indian citizens cannot just cross these borders by "only" showing their passport. Rather, whenever they want to cross these borders, they will first need to travel to Berne, the Swiss capital, and apply for a visa to the Schengen area – the union of fifteen European countries who form one "visa area," of which Switzerland is not a member – at one of the embassies there. This involves paying fees, completing paperwork, providing various types of evidence, queuing for a significant amount of time outside the embassy, etc. These and many related state practices obviously powerfully constructed me and my friend as German and Indian, respectively, and both of us as non-Swiss, and they made national identity a salient aspect of our identity to us.

Another pervasive context for the construction of national identity is the range of practices that Billig (1995) has termed "banal nationalism." By "banal nationalism" Billig means the myriad practices that make the nation ubiquitous. Such practices include: the daily weather forecast on TV that is presented against a map of our country; the celebration of our nation on a regular basis, such as the daily Pledge of Allegiance in many US schools, or national holidays such as Australia Day in Australia, Independence Day in the USA, or the Day of German Unity in Germany; the use of national symbols in consumer advertising (e.g. chocolate with the Swiss Cross on the packaging); and sports events where national teams compete against each other and which are often reported and viewed as if the whole nation were involved (see Bishop and Jaworski 2003 for an informative case study). These examples do not reflect national identity but rather they construct national identity. Given the ubiquity of discourses about national identity, it is thus not surprising that intercultural communication studies have a hard time going beyond these discourses. However, it is unsatisfactory when research in intercultural communication ends up being little more than yet another instantiation of the discursive construction of national identity.

Informed by anthropology, discourse analysis, social psychology, and sociolinguistics, critical studies in intercultural communication have dealt with the twin problems of essentialism ("people have a culture") and reification of national and

ethnic identity as culture (“people from group X behave in ways that are static, internally similar and different from other groups”) in two different ways. One solution is to argue that “all communication is intercultural” (Holliday et al. 2004: xv). The other is to develop theories and understandings that make “culture,” and consequently “intercultural communication,” amenable to empirical analysis as, for instance, Blommaert (2005), Piller (2011), and Scollon and Scollon (2001a) have done.

Beyond “Having a Culture”

Some of the students I quoted above describe themselves as belonging to two or more cultures. Similarly, we hear of migrants who learn not only a new language but also a new culture and thus become “bicultural” (e.g., Paulston 2005). Children born to expatriate parents have recently gained their own label, TCK for “Third Culture Kids” (e.g., Tokuhama-Espinosa 2003). Although the star of “multiculturalism” has started to wane somewhat, countries and cities that have seen significant immigration are often called “multicultural” and Kramersch (1998: 82) describes “persons who belong to various discourse communities, and who therefore have the linguistic resources and social strategies to affiliate and identify with many different cultures and ways of using language” as multicultural. There is a large literature on the processes of cultural hybridization (e.g., Bhabha 1994), on the cultures of the diaspora and of migration (e.g., Brah 1996; Gilroy 1997; Hall 1997) and on cultural crossings (e.g., Rampton 1995). The obvious point is that, given the state of connectedness of our world, no culture exists in isolation. In a recent magazine article in *CNN Traveller*, for instance, a Thai informant explains Thai culture to an American journalist as follows: “The Thai people like cowboy films. We identify with them. We grew up with *Stagecoach* and *Wyatt Earp*. The first film I ever saw was a *Wayne – Rio Grande*. ‘You must learn that a man’s word to anything, even his own destruction, is his honour,’ he quotes” (Taylor 2006: 54). The example is banal: I could have chosen any number of examples making the same point, and each reader will be able to add their own examples to show that “culture” is in a constant state of flux and cross-fertilization. Given that each of us belongs to many cultures in this sense, and that all these combinations are slightly different, it is thus possible to argue that, in this sense, all communication is intercultural.

Additionally, there is a second way in which the argument against static views of culture can be made. Explorations of multiculturalism, third cultures, hybridity, and crossing are often conceived as challenges to dominant accounts of a uniform culture. However, as Holliday (1999) argues, these accounts still take the nation and/or ethnicity as their point of departure. Holliday (1999) refers to these as “big culture” and argues for a shift of focus to “small culture,” which he defines as “relating to cohesive behavior in activities within any social grouping” (Holliday 1999: 241), for example, a “company culture” or a “family culture.” As I have done above, Holliday (1999) takes issue with the essentialism and reification of culture that mars much writing and discussion about intercultural

communication, both inside and outside academia. His concept of “small cultures” is inspired by the one of “community of practice.” Drawing on work in education by Lave and Wenger (1991), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464), who first introduced the concept into sociolinguistics, define a community of practice (CofP) as follows:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.

In language and gender studies, this dynamic and complex understanding of group practices has proved immensely useful and influential in transcending essentialist and reified notions of gender identity (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999). As a consequence, language and gender scholars no longer ask how men and women speak differently but rather how gender is produced in discourse. In analogy, I will now proceed to ask how culture and intercultural communication are produced in discourse.

Empirical Intercultural Communication

When it comes to talking about “intercultural communication,” “misunderstanding” and “miscommunication” are never far away. A typical example would be an intercultural communication title such as *When Cultures Collide* (Lewis 2000). Academic publications tend to be more guarded in their language; the pervasive association of “intercultural communication” with “misunderstanding” can be found there, too, although the aim tends to be a positive one, such as to contribute to bridging cultural conflicts (LeBaron 2003) or to developing intercultural competence (Byram et al. 2001). The good will that emanates from numerous cross-cultural and intercultural communication texts is best expressed by the often-quoted Deborah Tannen (1986: 43) dictum: “the fate of the earth depends on cross-cultural communication.” Somewhat provocatively, I am tempted to re-formulate this statement as “Cross-cultural communication is part of the world’s problems.” Our contemporary obsession with “culture” and “cultural difference” and “intercultural communication” is “a way of seeing” (Berger 1972). In thrall to a cultural worldview, we see “culture” where linguistic proficiency and communicative competence (or their lack) and inequality and injustice would explain much more. Hinnenkamp (1987: 176) compares cultural ways of seeing in the field of intercultural communication to an imaginary joke up the researcher’s sleeve: “Culture as adapted in most linguistic subdisciplines has unfortunately become a *passé partout*-notion: whenever there is a need for a global explanation of differences between members of different speech communities the culture-card is played –

the more 'distant' in geographic and linguistic origin, the more 'cultural difference'!"

In the following, I will argue the point that intercultural communication research is mistaken in considering "culture" a key variable in human understanding and misunderstanding in two ways. In the first part of my argument, I will show that some misunderstandings that are considered "cultural" are in fact linguistic misunderstandings. In the second part of my argument, I will show that some misunderstandings that are considered "cultural" are in fact based on inequality and taking recourse to "intercultural communication" can serve to obfuscate relationships of global inequality and injustice. The first argument is based on work in the tradition of interactional sociolinguistics and bilingualism studies, and the second on work that draws inspiration from a combination of critical sociolinguistic ethnography and discourse analysis and related approaches, and is most cogently presented in Blommaert (2005). Both these approaches and arguments are empirical, which in this context means first and foremost that they do not treat cultural group membership as an a priori assumption.

Language in "Intercultural Communication"

For a linguist, a large part of the intercultural communication literature makes surprising reading. Part of the surprise results from the limited to nonexistent attention to language, as if natural languages were a negligible aspect of communication. Some of the most widely read textbooks in intercultural communication have their disciplinary bases in Business Studies, Communication Studies, Management Studies, and Psychology (e.g., Rogers and Steinfatt 1999; Harris and Moran 2000; Gudykunst and Mody 2001; Hofstede 2001; Martin et al. 2001; Martin and Nakayama 2003; Chaney and Martin 2004; Jandt 2004, 2006; Reynolds and Valentine 2004; Ting-Toomey and Chung 2004; Lustig and Koester 2005; Varner and Beamer 2005). These texts tend to give short shrift to language (usually one chapter out of around twelve). Now, a linguist would consider natural language the most important aspect of human communication, and I cannot help feeling that this may be more than professional prejudice. The neglect is such that it has even started to be noticed in these disciplines themselves. Vaara et al. (2005: 59), for instance, observe that "[n]atural languages have received very little attention in organization and management studies." What is more, the content of what little consideration there is of language issues can be of the "weird and wonderful" kind. Typically, "the language chapter" invokes the "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" and the concept of linguistic relativity, stating that our language influences the way we see the world, and that our language makes different aspects of reality salient to us. I will provide a detailed example although I do not wish to single out these particular authors for criticism because I consider the example to be fairly typical. Chaney and Martin (2004: 96) provide a table that matches "verbal style" with "ethnic group." For "Germans" they offer the following entry: "In the German language, the verb often comes at the end of the sentence. In oral communication, Germans do not immediately get to the point." This entry suggests

that having the verb at the end of the sentence says something about when “the point” is being made. However, such a claim conflates syntax and pragmatics. The position of the verb in German is purely a matter of syntax: the verb is the second constituent in a main clause and the last one in a subordinate clause. In contrast, the position of “the point” is a matter of pragmatic choice and may be located anywhere in a sentence and across syntactic boundaries. Another example comes from the entry for “Japanese”: “The word ‘yes’ has many different meanings.” The implication of such an entry is that such polysemy and polyfunctionality are special to Japanese, while they are in fact a characteristic of all natural languages (Harris 1998). Just like in Japanese and any other language, English words, too, can be used to mean the exact opposite of their “real” (i.e. their core or dictionary) meaning: think of the “start-button” many of us need to press to shut down – that is, “end” – our Microsoft Windows computers; or think of the many rape cases where a woman’s “no” is said to have been heard as a “yes” (Kulick 2003). The relativity of linguistic structure is obvious to anyone who knows more than one language. However, the focus on formal relativity in much of the intercultural communication literature tends to obscure a much more fundamental relativity, namely that of function: we do different things with language, as the following example nicely illustrates:

Community differences extend to the role of languages in naming the worlds they help to shape or constitute. In central Oregon, for example, English speakers typically go up a level in taxonomy when asked to name a plant for which they lack a term: ‘some kind of bush’; Sahaptin speakers analogize: ‘sort of an A’, or ‘between an A or a B’ (A and B being specific plants); Wasco speakers demur: ‘No, no name for that,’ in keeping with a cultural preference for precision and certainty of reference.

(Hymes 1996: 45)

Note that Dell Hymes does not make sweeping statements about English, Sahaptin, and Wasco speakers per se but about those in a specific place, central Oregon. If we take the concept of functional relativity seriously, it becomes clear that sweeping assertions about languages and their speakers such as the ones quoted above (“German speakers do not immediately get to the point”; “[in Japanese], the word “yes” has many different meanings”) are quite meaningless, as “English,” “German” or “Japanese” may be quite different entities from each other, and for their diverse speakers. For instance, as a speaker of English, I can write a paper for the *Handbook of Intercultural Discourse and Communication* addressing an international student audience – I could not use any of my other languages for this purpose, least of all Bavarian, the oral dialect of my childhood. So, “English” and “Bavarian” are different-order categories (see de Swaan 2001, for a model of the different categories of languages). At the same time, “English speakers” are a huge group, and use “English” in many different ways for many different purposes – relatively few write academic handbook chapters, for instance.

Above I argued that culture is often an a priori assumption in intercultural communication. The same is true for language: “English,” “German,” “Japanese,” etc., are all a priori assumptions that have their origin in the same source as

the frequent identification of “culture” with “nation” and/or “ethnicity” – namely the strong hold that nationalism has on us. “To speak of the language, without further specification, as linguists [and writers on intercultural communication] do, is tacitly to accept the official definition of the official language of a political unit” (Bourdieu 1991: 45). This trap – to base research in intercultural communication on a range of a priori assumptions about “culture” and “language” – can only be avoided by a commitment to studying language, culture and communication in context. Empirical intercultural communication as it is conducted in the tradition of interactional sociolinguists as pioneered by John Gumperz (1982a, b, and Chapter 5 of this volume) has studied actual face-to-face interactions between people with different kinds of background knowledge for a long time, and isolated contextualization cues as a key variable in misunderstandings. Contextualization cues are those aspects of our communication that relate what we say to the context or that signal how we expect what we say to be interpreted: “signaling mechanisms such as intonation, speech rhythms, and choice among lexical, phonetic, and syntactic options . . . are said to affect the expressive quality of a message but not its basic meaning” (Gumperz 1982a: 16). We tend to think of these signals as fairly universal (e.g., “surely, you can’t misinterpret a smile?”) but they are not (e.g., a smile can be a sign of friendliness or of embarrassment). This is particularly important to bear in mind as interaction must be conducted in a specific language, and participants in an interethnic encounter oftentimes have unequal proficiency levels. Numerous studies have shown that misunderstandings predominantly result from limited proficiency in one or more of the languages of the participants in the interethnic encounter, especially the dominant language, including limited awareness of different contextualization cues (e.g., Bremer et al. 1996; Birkner and Kern 2000; Roberts 2000; Roberts et al. 2005). Roberts et al. (2005: 473), for instance, found in a study of 232 general practice consultations in four inner-London medical practices that lack of proficiency in the languages involved in the encounters was the main problem in medical encounters in this multilingual community: “Twenty per cent of all the consultations we filmed contained misunderstandings caused by language/cultural differences, where talk itself is the problem. These misunderstandings related to issues of language and self-presentation rather than culturally-specific health beliefs. This challenges the literature on culture and ethnicity which exoticises patients from linguistic minorities.”

In summary, intercultural communication needs a more sophisticated understanding of natural language processes, particularly multilingual interactions, as it has been developed in interactional sociolinguistics and related ethnographic approaches in order not to mistake language problems for cultural problems.

Inequality in Intercultural Communication

When Roberts et al. (2005) speak of “language/cultural differences” in the quote above, it seems almost as if they do not want to take a stand on whether

contextualization cues are an aspect of language or of culture. Indeed, whether we consider language use more an aspect of language or of culture may be a purely academic question, and the argument I have presented so far – linguistic misunderstandings are often mistaken for cultural misunderstandings – does not yet justify the provocative “cross-cultural communication is part of the world’s problems” I set out to argue at the beginning of the previous section. I will argue this point more fully in this section, where I am hoping to show that talk of “cultural difference” often serves to obscure inequality and injustice. In the same vein in which Roberts et al. (2005) rebuke “the literature on ethnicity and culture” for exoticizing minority patients, I will now turn to “culturism,” “similarly constructed to racism or sexism in that the imagined characteristics of the ‘culture’ (or ‘women’ or ‘Asians’) are used to define the person” (Holliday et al. 2004: 24). Culturism is a form of Orientalism (Said 1978), an ideology that serves to justify colonial and neocolonial relationships. As explicit racism has largely become unspeakable in mainstream North America and Europe (Piller and Takahashi 2011), invoking “their culture” has often served to cloak discrimination. Conversely, minority groups may actually rally around cultural identity in order to escape being racially framed, as is, for instance, the case for the Indian community in the USA. Subramanian (2000) shows how immigrants from India to North Carolina have worked hard to present themselves as a distinct cultural group (e.g. by forming religious and cultural associations). As a consequence, they are not seen as Black Americans, and they have largely managed to escape racial discrimination. That means that discourses of cultural difference are not really about culture but that they obscure relationships of inequality and difference, and that a critical study of intercultural communication needs to ask who makes culture relevant to whom, how, in which context and for which purposes?

Thus, I now take an interdiscourse communication perspective that is informed by the critical tradition in linguistics and discourse analysis (see Blommaert 2005; Piller 2011). The ubiquity of discourses of culture needs to be seen in the context of globalization, and the contexts where discourses about “cultural difference” and “intercultural communication” are most pervasive include such key sectors of the new world order as: tourism (e.g., Thurlow and Jaworski 2010), including education tourism (e.g., Piller and Takahashi 2006); citizenship (e.g., Hogan-Brun et al. 2009); service work (e.g., Heller 2010); and the commodification of identities in advertising (e.g., Piller 2003). In the following, I will use the discourse of mail-order bride websites to exemplify my point (see also Piller 2011). Consider the following excerpts from two randomly chosen mail-order bride websites:

Why choose a Filipina? Women from the Philippines are noted for their beauty, grace, charm and loyalty. With their sweet nature and shy smiles, Filipina ladies posses [sic] an inner beauty that most men find irresistible. Filipina women are by their nature family-orientated, resourceful and devoted. What’s more, English is one of the official languages of the Philippines, so communication is straight forward [sic], and as the majority of Filipina ladies are Christian, cultural compatibility is easier than some other Asian countries.²

Russian women share in their belief of traditional values and the desire to devote themselves to the man of their dreams. Russian women are affectionate, family oriented, and unlike American women, comfortable with their femininity. They are pleasers and not competitors. They expect their man to be the head of the family. Furthermore, Russian women look for what's positive in a man. They don't care about your looks, or possessions; they care about your personal qualities. They look for sensitivity, trust and understanding.³

What is striking about these excerpts is that a range of similar attributes, desirable in terms of traditional femininity, are attached to cultural labels: "Filipina/Russian women are X." What is more, the attributes for the two groups in the examples are virtually identical, and this is indeed true for all the mail-order bride websites in my corpus, irrespective of nationality: women from the global South are consistently represented as traditionally feminine while Western women are described as aggressive, selfish, unattractive, and materialistic. In the world of the mail-order bride website, only four categories of people exist: women of particular national backgrounds (Filipinas, Russian women, Thai women, etc.), Western women, local men and Western men. If local men are mentioned at all, they are portrayed, in a typical Orientalist trope (Marchetti 1993; Spurr 1993), as unfit husbands (e.g. as drinkers and gamblers) and as too few in number. Western men are never described in the same way as non-Western men and Western women are: they are the subject of these discourses, and not its object. So how do the culturist discourses of mail-order bride websites displace inequality onto culture? Economic globalization has widened the gap between the rich and the poor on this globe. The fact of ever-increasing inequality is well documented (Munck 2005) despite the rhetoric that often heralds globalization as a form of development aid. At the same time that the economic pressures on families in the global South increase, the global media bring images of consumerism to almost every household in the world, in a kind of "material striptease" (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002b). One of the consequences of neoliberal economic regimes in conjunction with the iconization of consumerism is an increase in international work migration, particularly of women. Female work migrants do typical "women's work" (i.e. reproductive work such as domestic work, child care and elder care) and sex work (e.g. Anderson 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002a), including the prototypical combination of all these, being a wife. What used to be a gender divide – domestic work – is being replaced by a class and race divide that is also gendered (Grob and Rothmann 2005). Or, to put it another way, the emotional, sexual, and reproductive labor of being a wife is being outsourced from the global North to the global South in the same way that the production of sneakers, plastic toys and computer chips has been outsourced. However, the very nature of our conceptions of romantic and intimate relationships entails that they not be recognized as work (i.e. the work is invisible; Oakley 1974). The recent boom in mail-order brides (O'Rourke 2002) is thus based on material global inequalities but in order to "work" as an illusion of romantic love it needs to be cloaked in cultural terms.

Conclusion

Intercultural communication is a vibrant field of study that is based in widely circulating discourses about culture and cultural difference. The frequent overlap between the voice of the researcher and the discourses in which it is embedded also make it a deeply problematic field. Linguistics can make at least two contributions to this field: from the perspective of interactional sociolinguistics and bilingualism studies, we need to insist that natural language is the prime mode in which “intercultural communication” takes place. The analysis of linguistic interaction, particularly between speakers with different kinds of linguistic trajectories and resources, always involves a consideration of the resources available to those speakers and the actual verbal and nonverbal detail of their interactions. Research in interactional sociolinguistics has shown that, when misunderstandings arise, “culture” is not even particularly likely to be implicated. At the same time, “culture” is so ubiquitous that interactants may very well be orienting towards it, even if they never mention it. Discourse analysis has an important contribution to make to retrace these “forgotten contexts” (Blommaert 2005) of “culture” by identifying discourses where “culture” is indeed important, whether explicitly or more implicitly, and to ask by whom, for whom, in which contexts, for which purposes. The key question of intercultural communication must shift from reified and inescapable notions of cultural difference to a focus on discourses where “culture” is actually made relevant and used as a communicative resource.

NOTES

- 1 This chapter is a revised and updated version of Piller (2007).
- 2 http://cebuonwheels.tripod.com/why_a_filipina.htm.
- 3 <http://eurointro.com>.

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