Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge for Intercultural Understanding

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Abstract: Intercultural communication is a form of interaction that is highly susceptible to errors. Hence, for a long time it has been studied primarily with regard to the kinds of misunderstandings that it typically produces. However, under pressure from increasing globalization, which also encompasses communication processes, questions concerning the limitations and possibilities for *intercultural understanding* are gaining the attention of scholars. This contribution addresses first the fundamental possibility of intercultural communication, and on this basis derives conclusions concerning how processes of intercultural understanding can be reconstructed. Finally, the attainable results and methods of a methodologically controlled reconstruction of these processes are described from the perspective of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Communication between individuals situated in the same cultural context is not always straightforward, and it stands to reason that communication between individuals in different cultures is inherently even more fragile. Some anthropologists have gone so far as to deny the very possibility of intercultural understanding. In some absolute sense they may be right; however, the central contention of this paper is that intercultural understanding can be at least approximately achieved because it is different only in degree, but not in essence, from the problem of intra-cultural understanding. To explain why this is so, I review some of the main insights gathered by a sociological discipline that has called itself *hermeneutic sociology of knowledge*. Then I shall reconsider the problems of intercultural communication, as practiced by sociologists, linguists, and anthropologists, in light of these insights. Finally, I propose that intercultural

understanding can be best facilitated by employing a kind of cultural mediator, a *culture-native co-interpreter*. [1]

Studies of intercultural communication have traditionally focused on the kinds of misunderstandings that arise in communicative acts between individuals rather than cultural systems of meaning. In intercultural conversations, clarifications, corrections, and readjustments of mutual assumptions and expectations are often required before a communicative act is felt to be successful, before the meaning "comes across." However, the unrelenting march of economic and cultural globalization poses problems not only of intercultural communication, but also of *intercultural understanding*, that is, problems of communicating meanings that are embedded in a global, unknown frame of reference, and whose full horizon of implications cannot be appreciated simply by clarifying single communicative acts. To this end, this article subjects the deeper problem of intercultural understanding to an analysis that draws on insights from the sociology of knowledge and from the science of textual interpretation, or hermeneutics. [2]

2. The Hermeneutic Reconstruction of Communication and Understanding

Sociologists are, in general, concerned with the behaviors of individuals in a given social context and with the ways in which they understand their own and others' behaviors. Drawing on theories of textual interpretation that go back at least to Protestant theologians of the 17th century hermeneutic sociology of knowledge sets itself the task of analyzing how everyday communicative acts are accomplished, and how they do or do not end in mutual understanding.[1] [3]

A basic postulate of hermeneutic theory is the inherent *unreachability of others' subjective awareness*; another is the *context-boundedness* of linguistic utterances. The first postulate precludes unmediated communication between two subjects which—if conceivable at all— would have to be a form of language-less, context-free mental telepathy. Given that any two subjects, even within the same culture have different life histories, the second postulate implies that even mediated communication is imperfect, for each message, when bound to the subject's life history and context, must acquire a meaning unique to that subject's consciousness. Thus, Alfred SCHÜTZ (1971, p.331-411), among others, has emphasized that inter-subjective understanding is, in the strictest sense, unattainable. In light of these difficulties, the most that can be achieved between individuals is *pragmatic understanding*, restricted by unavoidable differences in socialization and perspective. In everyday communication, SCHÜTZ says, individuals introduce certain tentative idealizations of their situation in order to bridge the communicative gap. These idealizations imagine the possibility of exchanging perspectives among interlocutors, so that meanings can be

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1 Important contributors to hermeneutic sociology of knowledge have been Peter BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN (1966), Herbert BLUMER (1969), Alfred SCHÜTZ and Thomas LUCKMANN (1973, 1989), Hans-Georg SOEFFNER (1989, 1996, 2000, 2004), Ronald HITZLER, Jo REICHERTZ and Norbert SCHRÖER (1999).

constituted in what subjects take to be reciprocal mirroring of each others' essentially incommensurable interpretative contexts. [4]

Thus, even in intra-cultural communication differing subjective frames of reference must be accommodated to one another to coordinate practical activities and to create the illusion of inter-subjective communication. Subjects agree to understand utterances made from one subjective perspective by translating them to other perspectives, by means of conventionalized *meaning adjustments.* Commonly employed adjustments gradually become part of a culturally anchored, inter-subjective "mirroring process" (SCHÜTZ, 1971, p.364-376) that is passed on over generations. Thus, *within* a culture, the hindrance to communication posed by incommensurable subjective experiences is overcome provisionally by conventionalized and generally accepted adjustments to the perspectives of differing individuals. [5]

The stability these adjustments achieve within a culture is, however, only relative. The assumed realm of mutually mirrored perspectives is in fact built on a fragile social consensus. The conventional adjustments necessary for inter-subjective communication are in continual flux. Even within a single culture, discrepancies in life histories and resulting subjective perspectives can become so severe that the necessary adjustments may become increasingly hard to negotiate, and inter-subjective communication breaks down. When cooperation and understanding are achieved again, it is only because both discrepancies and similarities between the perspectives have been seen more clearly, and pragmatically motivated new adjustments have been found that again allow practical cooperation and some feeling of mutual understanding. [6]

This possibility of reestablishing understanding among members of a single culture has important implications for the problem we address here, that of *inter*cultural communication. If members of the same culture must re-create the means of understanding each other, then members of different cultures ought to be in a position to do the same. The boundary between intra- and intercultural communicative processes thus can be seen as fluid, so that intercultural understanding, at least at the outset, is no more than a special case of generalized inter-subjective understanding. [7]

An important difference, however, is that, virtually by definition, members of a culture share an established communicative framework, within which conventionalized communicative adjustments can be made or re-created, even when communication seems to have broken down. Individuals from very divergent cultures would appear to share no such common ground. Nevertheless, to some extent, small, members of widely different cultures *do* manage to communicate, cooperate and understand each other, which hermeneutic theory takes as evidence that there exists some sub-stratum of universally shared experience upon which, with sufficient effort, the set of communicative adjustments required for a pragmatically useful degree of intercultural understanding can be constructed. [8]

To reconstruct how intercultural understanding may be achieved, we thus need to bear in mind that even intra-cultural communication rests on a shifting foundation of diverging perspectives. Within a given culture, the set of communicative adjustments is not fixed; the cultural context is being continually modified and re-negotiated. To see how understanding between two or more individuals of different cultural backgrounds arises, it would be desirable to follow these adjustment processes over an extended time, since this would allow us to observe communicative dissonances and the resulting gradual construction of realms of cultural similarity. Since this approach is expensive and very labor-intensive in practice, the more common approach has been to transcribe and analyze "intercultural communicative snap-shots" in which typical misunderstandings and their corrections can be used to uncover mechanisms by which understanding is achieved.[2] This method, however, introduces structural problems of its own, which will be discussed in the following section. [9]

3. The "Foreign Perspective" as an Obstacle to Intercultural Understanding

The hermeneutic postulate of the *unreachability of others' subjective awareness,* mentioned above, has epistemological consequences for a theoretical reconstruction of everyday communication. It implies that even methodologically controlled analysis of dialogs cannot attain inter-subjective objectivity in any strict sense. For intra-cultural research, this problem can be ignored, but not when at least one of the participants belongs to a culture with which the investigator is not intimately acquainted. The foreign life situation, and thus the resulting process of intercultural accommodation, can be grasped only via knowledge of the connections between language and practical activities in the foreign cultural framework. Thus, a vicious circle arises: in attempting merely to *observe* what happens in the intercultural dialog, the observing researcher must him/herself attempt to *understand* the foreign perspective implicit in the dialog. In other words, the researcher must accomplish what s/he merely wished to describe. [10]

Certainly failure to understand a foreign perspective does not necessarily pose an obstacle to reaching pragmatic agreement, and participants in an intercultural dialog may not need to pursue their mutual accommodation any further than is necessary to find a basis for the desired cooperation. But if the researcher's goal is to arrive at an *understanding* of the foreign perspective, s/he must look at more than the pragmatic agreements that arise in intercultural dialogs. At the same time, the researcher's goal is not that of an assimilating immigrant, simply to replace his/her perspective with the perspective of the foreign culture. Instead, the goal is to reconstruct the foreign perspective and to find adequate translations

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2   Following SCHÜTZ, hermeneutic analysis of intercultural communication attempts to find grounds for the *possibility* of intercultural communication and to reconstruct the process of achieving understanding. Linguistically oriented studies following in the tradition of SCHÜTZ—like those that analyze communicative genres (LUCKMANN, 1986; GÜNTHNER & KNOBLAUCH, 1995; GÜNTHNER & LUCKMANN, 2001)—instead focus communicative forms in which an assumption of "reciprocal perspectives" has stabilized. Thus, in these studies the symmetries of knowledge along with concomitant problems of understanding and the description of intercultural "intersecting sets of genres" stand in the foreground.

from it to one's own culture, so members of his/her culture can comprehend the other. The native grasp of the foreign culture must therefore be both deeper and more distanced than that of the immigrant (cf. STAGL, 1980), without giving up the perspective of the native culture (cf. DAMMANN, 1991). But is a translation of the reconstructed foreign culture to the perspective of the researcher really possible? [11]

Starting in the mid-1970's, established ethnographic anthropology (e.g. MALINOWSKI; GEERTZ) has been subject to radical criticism of its claim to scientific objectivity under the banner of "Writing Culture." The debate (summarized in CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986; SANJEK, 1991; BERG & FUCHS, 1993) has proceeded rather heterogeneously. This is due, in part, to its being entwined with moral scruples about the objectivity's reduction of individuals with whom a researcher may have had lengthy contact, a process that, for some, ends in a kind of betrayal others see in ethnographic presentations nothing more than a subtle kind of colonialism (TYLER, 1987) These scruples and self-criticisms merge with doubts about the possibility of obtaining any authentic access to a foreign culture. The result has been slightly desperate attempts to develop politically correct and quasi-authentic forms of representation in which, for example, long transcribed dialogs between the field researcher and the native are included (DWYER, 1977, 1979; TEDLOCK, 1987, 1993; for a summary, WOLFF, 1987, p.345-351), or unfamiliar material is reworked with a "poietic" method so as to invoke a kind of authenticity from within (TURNER, 1982). The alternative is simply to do without any representation of the foreign character of the culture. Ethnography then mutates to a new literary genre that opens conceivable cultural alternatives to the reader and therefore sees an ethnographic dialog merely as an "evocation" (TYLER, 1986, 1987). [12]

All these approaches, despite their differences and despite their awareness of the hermeneutic unreachability of others' subjective awareness, still accept clandestinely the goals set by Bronislaw MALINOWSKI (1979) and Clifford GEERTZ (1977) to reconstruct and present an "adequate picture of the native culture." It makes more sense, however, to address the hermeneutic unreachability *offensively*. Addressing the problem head on, one has to ask what people in fact *do* when they orient themselves to a foreign culture, i.e., what strategies they have available to access a foreign culture reconstructively and to acquire it in a methodologically controlled way. [13]

People—and thus communication researchers as well—who are confronted with the task of understanding a foreign culture are inevitably forced to accept a dialog, a necessity that the Writing-Culture debate has emphasized. The necessary recourse to dialog introduces a problem of perspectives; the researcher has no choice but to use the own biography and cultural background as the contextual basis for approaching the foreign culture. The foreign culture presents itself to him or her only in fragments, reactively. [14]

If the object of study is not constituted in some impenetrable way in the dialog with the researcher, then it does not make sense to want to dodge its deeper

import. Instead, the researcher should seek out possibilities for dialog in order to test and refine his/her hypotheses and pre-conceptions. Granting that the researcher can never give up entirely the own cultural frame, his/her willingness to submit to the dialog opens the possibility of distancing himself/herself from that frame. "This kind of interpretation, which compensates the impossibility of erasing one's origins by the possibility of distancing oneself from those origins" is called by Odo MARQUARD (1981, p.124) "distancing hermeneutics." [15]

In setting the foundation of a hermeneutic sociology of knowledge on a dialog orientation, the second methodological principle has already been implicitly established, namely *reflection*. The goal of the cultural researcher is not merely to expand the own cultural frame of reference via the dialog, but rather to enlarge it in a methodologically controlled way. This means that he or she must deliberately distance her- or himself from the dialog again and again, in order to clarify, in just what sort of dialog she or he is engaging, whether the approach chosen is appropriate or whether others should be adopted. Methodological differentiation of the researcher's prior understanding shows itself to be a peculiar sort of mental movement, in which s/he enters into the material of study by repeatedly alienating himself/herself from it. This "broken" approach to the material, with simultaneous acceptance and rejection, is a prerequisite for an "understanding sort of recognition" (PLESSNER, 1979). Only by reflectively distancing oneself from the dialog—into which s/he must enter—can the researcher gain the means to justify the results of his efforts against those of others and submit them to examination by the scientific community. [16]

This relationship between researcher and foreign native has come to light most clearly in the debates concerning a hermeneutics of foreign cultures; it leaves, however, the question open as to what the researcher's dialog with the native attempts to achieve. It has already been noted that, unlike an immigrant, the researcher's goal is not to assimilate himself/herself to the foreign culture. The dialog is only a means to gain familiarity with the perspective of the foreign culture, in order to translate it for members of his/her own—with the proviso that a strict translation is bound to fail. Immersed in the dialog, the researcher has no overarching standpoint available which would subsume both cultures, so as to make a neutral set of correspondences between them visible. Various cultural per-spectives can hardly be translated smoothly among one another; at best, they can be "harmonized" with one another, as Walter BENJAMIN (1977, p.59) put it. [17]

If attempts to obtain "authentic" translations of the foreign culture are condemned to failure, one must ask what possibilities remain—according to what "rules" the harmonizing dialog with the foreign native take place. In agreement with the notion that ethnological understanding is a special case of understanding foreign perspectives, BUBNER addresses this question with general hermeneutic arguments:

> "Ethnographic research directs its attention outwards to an unknown world in order to set it in correspondence, inwards, with the familiar world. There is no other way to make the foreign world accessible other than by dissolving its initial strangeness into

similarities that permit re-recognition. The researcher finds associations that let the encountered world seem less bizarre and unexplainable to him. He establishes correspondences between strange behaviors and behaviors that he and all others in his culture perform; in short, he translates one form of life to another" (BUBNER, 1980, p.190). [18]

Translation thus means appropriation! It is thus the task of the researcher to gather harmonizing hypotheses out of the dialog with the foreign culture on the basis of his own culturally conditioned pre-understanding—reflecting on both of these—about frames of relevance and interpretation in that culture and thus, provisionally, to understand these better. [19]

The researcher thus remains a prisoner of the own pre-understanding while attempting to escape it in limited ways. S/he differentiates and elaborates his/her pre-understanding in accommodating himself/herself to the foreign perspective. Appropriating the culture by translating it, the researcher performs an "excursion beyond the bounds of his own language's conventions (…) a demolition and a reconstruction of his language" (ASAD, 1986, p.157). These labors are, in effect *a special, scientific (re)construction of the general process of intercultural understanding*. The researcher elaborates the own perspective so as to recognize a realm of similarities to the foreign perspective, with respect to which the foreign culture can be seen as familiar and understandable, yet without completely annihilating the own frames of relevance and interpretation. We might say that the researcher cultivates a special kind of everyday intercultural understanding, grounded in the same processes as those of everyday intercultural understanding. Thus s/he does not actually see the foreign culture as it is, taken by itself, but s/he

a. sees it "for himself/herself" and makes it available and known to himself/herself and his/her readers, and
b. makes his/her appropriation of it accessible to examination and reconsid-eration by the scholarly community—whereby the process of inter—subjective reflection and generalization upon generalizations is maintained. [20]

Only once a reconstructive appropriation of the foreign perspective has been accomplished via dialog can a relation be established between it and the researcher's native perspective. [21]

4. Appropriating the Foreign Perspective via a Culture-Native Co-Interpreter

The ethnographic researcher's task is not to "go native" but to understand the foreign culture from his/her own perspective. A total "ethnographic re-socialization" would thus be of questionable value, and it would be in any case much too long and difficult. Moreover, by merely replacing one cultural perspective with another, a re-socialization would shed little light on the process of intercultural understanding itself. However, the problem faced most often in

trying to clearly reconstruct processes of intercultural understanding is that the investigator is not familiar with at least one of the communication perspectives involved. Remaining an outsider to its speech community, the researcher is not able to adopt the perspective of its actors. To compensate, the researcher must be willing to engage in a dialog with the foreign point of view. [22]

A sort of "translation" then emerges from the dialog, as explained above, through appropriation: In the course of his confrontation with the foreign perspective, the investigator must elaborate the own in such a way as to mark out a clearly bounded realm of recognized similarities to the foreign view, via which s/he can accept it as familiar, without, however, changing the overall, larger frame of reference and interpretation of the own perspective. In effect, the researcher resorts to a kind of naïve everyday intercultural understanding, but refines it methodologically so as to obtain an explicit reconstruction of it in the form of an analogy-based cultural translation that reflects on the dialog from which it was won. [23]

Since an "ethnographic re-socialization" is out of the question, the data gathered in dialog must be evaluated by some sort of appropriate methodology. Following other sociologists and socio- linguists who have considered the problems raised by a hermeneutics of foreign perspectives in empirical field work, I propose that the data on the process of intercultural understanding can be evaluated with the help of a *culture-native co-interpreter*. [24]

4.1 The qualifications and task of the culture-native co-interpreter

The task of this co-interpreter is, roughly, to interpret the foreign perspective for the researcher in such a way that s/he can find the required "appropriating" analogies, analogies that make opaque or puzzling segments of the dialog understandable and plausible. This requires a case-specific translation from one culture-specific frame of interpretation to another. The co-interpreter's task is restricted, however, to "merely" identifying adequate analogies. Werner VON DER OHE invokes the image of the ferryman who "packages the 'freight' of the dialog naturally and appropriately before directing it into the right channels, and who ensures that the contents and packaging meet the customs requirements of the receiving parties" (1987, p.403). Seeing the task of the co-interpreter as that of *a (re)-constructing interpreter*, we can identify the competencies he or she should ideally possess as these:

- The co-interpreter must be familiar with the culture-specific interpretational frames that s/he must pair. The familiarity must be more than literary or theoretical; ideally. Ideally it emerges from practical involvement in day-to-day affairs of both communities. Knowledge of the relevant frames of interpretation and orientation that is grounded in daily practices of the cultures is prerequisite to a carefully nuanced pairing of textual readings.
- The co-interpreter must be able to place the frames of interpretation that are relevant for the study in an appropriate context. That is, s/he must be able to

find and explain fitting analogies from the studied culture to the culture of the researcher. In the words of Walter Benjamin, s/he must "find in the target language those expressive intentions which in that language awaken an echo of the original" (BENJAMIN, 1977, p.57).

- To be able to find the best readings, the co-interpreter must be informed about the general framework and goals of the study. [25]

These are necessary if s/he is to select the most relevant frame of interpretation in each specific example. Beyond this, the co-interpreter must be prepared at least in a rudimentary way to learn about the procedures and methodology of the researcher's approach:

- It must be clear to the co-interpreter that the researcher's interest is to uncover the generally valid aspects of each individually reconstructed example.
- The co-interpreter must supply interpretations according to the principle of successive selectivity, i.e., alternative interpretations must be developed gradually toward an explication of the example structure. [26]

4.2 The procedural steps for appropriation supported by a co-interpreter

The qualifications named above are, of course, quite demanding. This is particularly evident in a capability that the co-interpreter can hardly master alone: the requirement that the co-interpreter should have "practical awareness" (GIDDENS, 1984) of both culture-specific frames of interpretation, and, moreover, s/he should be able to articulate these in "discursive awareness." Unfortunately, it is often the case that co-interpreters are familiar with their culture of origin but have received only a secondary socialization in the target culture of the researcher. They are not entirely familiar with the day-to-day, practical schemata to which the analogies of the translation must refer, and this leaves residual problems in the translation. [27]

Precisely this situation makes clear that the process of appropriative interpretation can only be prepared by the co-interpreter, but not accomplished. The researcher must carry on a "dialog of appropriation" with the co-interpreter, and must complete the translation himself/herself. Thus, the dialogic appropriation of a foreign cultural perspective, in the framework of a reconstruction of an intercultural process of understanding, entails the following series of steps, which are proposed as a means of encouraging such intercultural appropriation in a methodologically controlled way. [28]

4.2.1 First appropriation step: the interpretation by the co-interpreter

After being introduced to the researcher's goals (a) and to the principles of sequential-analytic interpretation (b), the co-interpreter can be presented with the data to be interpreted. The co-interpreter's task in this phase is to study the material intensively in accord with the guidelines mentioned above and to identify

alternative readings within the foreign perspective. These alternatives must, however, be constructed in a way that they are recognizable as such for the researcher. This means the alternatives are in fact already oriented to the researcher's frame of interpretation and thus implicitly select a first set of analogy constructions, which point the way for the remainder of the work. [29]

4.2.2 Second appropriation step: a conversation with the co-interpreter

The co-interpreter now presents a preliminary, analogizing interpretation to the researcher. This act gives the researcher an opportunity to question the co-interpreter about passages s/he finds puzzling because s/he senses (whether correctly or not) gaps, inconsistencies, or other kinds of irritations, and to ask the co-interpreter for elaborations and clarifications. In the course of an open discussion of the translation, both researcher and co-interpreter can learn from each other about the other's perspective and frame of interpretation. This dialog can start to break down the barriers to communication discussed above. At the same time, this conversation will often expand the range of available meanings that need to be sorted out—a task which can overtax the co-interpreter's lack of methodological experience. [30]

4.2.3 Third appropriation step: hermeneutic explication of the shared interpretive discussion

In a second phase of the interpretative work, the analogies constructed in the conversation with the co-interpreter are studied. To aid the subsequent hermeneutic reconstruction, all alternative readings mentioned, including those rejected, should be stored on a tape recording of the conversation. This recording then provides material for analyzing and clarifying the construction of the analogies. [31]

Even though the discussion with the co-interpreter is guided by methodological standards, how interpretive readings are found and selected is inevitably hard to pin down. Interpreting the transcript of the discussion now provides an opportunity to examine and evaluate the course of the deliberations, so as to take account of how the interpretive discussion has influenced the choices made and to correct any distortions it has introduced. [32]

4.2.4 Fourth appropriation step: verification of the interpretation

Since, in a very essential way, the analogizing interpretations offered by the co-interpreter cannot be verified, it makes sense not to rely entirely on a single co-interpreter. Rather, once a trial interpretation has been drafted, it should be refined with the help of other control interpreters, from whose judgments the final text will emerge inductively. The fullness of interpretations offered by the co-interpreters must be appropriated step by step. [33]

The interpretations offered by the co-interpreter should be discussed in such a way that s/he is forced to think about the analogies on which they are based, to

re-consider and hone them in such as way as to make them consistent with one another. [34]

Subsequently, in evaluating the transcribed interpretive discussions, the final interpretation is adapted to the interpretational frame of the intended audience, according to criteria of relevance set by the research goals. [35]

A distinctive characteristic of this method for understanding the communicative perspective of a foreign culture is that it is not a simple, one-step appropriation. Rather, it entails a double appropriation: the translation obtained from the co-interpreter is, in turn, interpreted by the researcher to bring it into its final form. [36]

Only once the secondary interpretation has been accomplished can the researcher attempt to describe specific instances of viewpoints taken by the foreign culture "from within." The dialogic appropriation is then finished, and the prerequisites will have been established for bringing the opposed cultural perspectives, the familiar and the foreign, in relation to one another in such a way that the dynamics of intercultural understanding can be comprehended in the context of their interactions.[3] [37]

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3   It is unfortunately not possible here to give an example. An analysis reduced to a few pages would not illustrate the method in a perspicuous way. The method has been developed in the course of a study of intercultural communication between German investigative police officers and Turkish accused suspects during arraignments. A detailed description of the approach can be found in German in SCHRÖER (2002).

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