

# Language and Culture in Context: A Primer on Intercultural Communication

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## Preface

In teaching intercultural communication in the past, I have used a standard North American textbook, Neuliep's *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach* (2012). At that time, a recent comment on amazon.com about this textbook was as follows:

### **A Jesus stomping good time!**

By Gigs

*I was looking for a book about stomping on Jesus, man this one really fit the bill. Sure, there are other books about stomping on Jesus, but this is really the authority on the matter. I was a little disappointed that there wasn't more coverage of stomping on Buddha, considering that the title of this book is "Intercultural Communication" so it loses one star for that.*

As a review of a commercial textbook, this is unusual; its tone, however, rich with sarcasm, reflects frequent language use on the Internet when a writer feels strongly about a topic. This is, in fact, one of many reviews posted on the textbook in response to media reports about a professor in Florida [carrying out a suggested class activity](#) in which students were asked to write "Jesus" on a slip of paper, step on it, and then discuss with classmates their reactions. The expectation in designing the activity is that most students will not step on the paper. What the exercise was intended to reveal to students was how central to many people's core values religion is and what power there is in symbolic actions. The public reaction in the US, as seen in the Amazon reviews was very different, namely that this was a denigration of Christianity. The episode is informative in a couple of ways:

- *It dramatizes how volatile and emotion-laden issues related to religious beliefs or spiritual views can be*, topics that inevitably arise in discussing communication across cultures. There are often knee-jerk reactions to perceived slights to religious beliefs. This is by no means limited to Christians, as the virulent reaction to [Mohammed cartoons](#) from Denmark in 2010 demonstrated. When we perceive our core values to be under attack, we don't reason or look to see in what context the incident occurred. This can quickly lead to misunderstandings and conflict, making any kind of reasoned communication unlikely.
- *It demonstrates the power of symbols*. The name of Jesus written on a slip of paper is not in itself a religious document or statement of faith – rather it evokes the beliefs associated with that name. Symbols can have profound

cultural significance. National flags, for example, may carry strong emotional power, so that defacing, burning, or disrespecting a flag may be taken as a rejection of the values, beliefs, and behaviors associated with that particular national culture (see sidebar). Language itself is a system made up of symbols (words point to meanings) and is a central mechanism for conveying elements of a culture.

#### Flag burning: A powerful symbolic act

In the United States there has been at times quite a bit of controversy over whether it is okay to burn the U.S. American flag... Many of the problems related to this controversy are due to the symbolic nature of what is done when a flag is burned. The flag represents the United States and the principles upon which the United States as a political entity is based. Thus, burning the flag, whether it is in the U.S. or in Iran, is not simply destroying a piece of cloth. It is making a statement about a way of life. Some argue that the burning itself is symbolic of the freedoms that exist in the United States and others feel that the burning represents an effort to destroy those freedoms. Thus, symbolic acts are open to great differences of interpretation.

Hall, Covarrubias & Kirschbaum, 2017, p. 9

- *It points to the misperception that intercultural communication competence is about giving up personal beliefs and values.* This is absolutely not the case. In fact, the exercise described above was designed to make students aware of the emotional intensity of their own religious beliefs. This can help build self-awareness as well as an appreciation of the fact that others' beliefs and values may be as crucially important in their lives. It can be safely assumed that in inter-religious groups, the reaction would be similar to the one cited above if students were asked to write down the word they used to refer to the God they worshipped as compared to 'Jesus'.
- *It illustrates how rapidly an event can go viral on the Internet.* Almost all comments on the incident echoed those of the commenter above. The kind of **groupthink**<sup>1</sup> in evidence here is a common phenomenon on the Internet, which can sometimes function as a repeating amplifier, with the tendency for many people to interpret events or news in a way that confirms already-held beliefs.

The reaction to the suggested "step on Jesus" exercise illustrates something else, the importance of context in understanding and interpreting human actions and speech. The context in this case is a formal classroom environment in which an academic experiment is being carried out, designed as a learning and self-awareness experience. The Amazon reviews ignored this context, instead viewing the incident as a direct attack on Christianity. This points to the fact that the very same words used or identical behaviors performed can have very different meanings and outcomes depending on when, where, and how they take place. Using slang, for example, is fine if among friends or family but may be unacceptable at work or in the classroom. Propping one's feet up to relax may be common in the US but might

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<sup>1</sup> Bolded items in the text are defined in the Key Concepts section at the end of each chapter.

result in a reprimand if done on a German train (author's personal experience), or even be perceived as a personal insult in an Arab setting, should the soles of the shoes be facing out. This text takes a contextual approach to intercultural communication, meaning that the environments — physical, cultural, local, electronic, etc. — will be seen as key elements in considering the dynamics and significance of human encounters. That involves looking in all its complexity at the intersection of the individual(s) and the conversational context. Rather than trying to understand outcomes based on a person's background or status, interactions instead will be analyzed to understand their myriad dynamics. The goal is not to predict behaviors and outcomes but to describe and understand.

Neuliep's textbook (latest version 2017) is representative of many used in the US, in that it focuses on intercultural communication from the perspective of communication studies (see also Jandt, 2017; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2015; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Increasingly in recent years — and particularly outside the US — introductory textbooks tend to orient more towards applied linguistics with a greater emphasis on the role of language (Hua, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Piller, 2017). That includes texts emphasizing conversation analysis (McConachy, 2017) and critical discourse analysis (Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2011). We are also seeing textbooks which embrace critical approaches to intercultural communication (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2017; Martin & Nakayama, 2018), social constructivist approaches (Kurylo, 2012), peace-building (Remland, Jones, Foeman, & Arévalo), and social justice (Sorrells, 2015). This textbook draws on concepts from all these approaches, referencing recent research in the field as broadly as possible. Those concepts include:

- *Complexity theory*. Originating from chaos theory and used initially in the natural sciences, complexity theory "sees the world as complex to the extent that it consists of always-changing, unstable and dynamic systems" (Ang, 2011, p. 781). We shall see that it is particularly helpful in gaining hold of the slippery concept of "culture," given its variety of sources, influences, and manifestations. It is also useful in untangling the fluid and complex dynamics of personal identity formation today (Godwin-Jones, 2018).
- *Cultural intelligence*, initially developed within Business Management Studies (Earley & Ang, 2003). This concept can be helpful in understanding the complexity of our globalized world through "strategic simplification", breaking down interactional difficulties based on contextual framing.
- *Critical realism*. The "critical turn" in social science research has led researchers in critical discourse analysis to look at how power and privilege inform and shape conversational dynamics (Gee, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993). The emergent outcomes, as they are affected by class,

gender, place, and wealth are central concerns with scholars – most associated with sociology – using critical realism (Collier, 1994).

- *Global citizenship*. The concern with the social forces shaping discourses and the need not only to learn, but also to act point to the growing recognition within the field of second language acquisition that social justice needs to be an ultimate goal in intercultural communication, leading to a sense of global responsibility (Byram, Golubeva, Hui, & Wagner, 2017).

Common to these approaches is the prominence of context, leading to a view of human interactions as dynamic and changeable, given the complexity of language and culture, as human agents interact with their environments. This aligns with the principal approach used in this textbook, which is broadly ecological, looking at the multiple factors of individuality and context (including but not limited to national origin) that influence intercultural communication.

There is an attempt throughout the text to incorporate views on intercultural communication from a geographically diverse array of scholars, supplementing the author's North American perspective. How intercultural communication is envisioned as a discipline varies considerably from country to country. In many cases, intercultural communication is associated with professional areas such as business, education, healthcare, or hospitality services. These are all areas in which communication with those who represent different cultures and languages is crucially important, and where encounters between those representing different cultures is increasingly the norm. While in the US, intercultural communication is often associated with communication studies, in Europe and Australia, it is commonly seen as a field within applied linguistics. This text strives to incorporate findings and perspectives from many different approaches, but considers language, broadly conceived, as central to intercultural communication, and thus different dimensions of language use are woven into each unit. This is in contrast to most IC textbooks in which "language" is the topic in one of 10 or 12 chapters. Piller (2007) points out that surprising fact (from the perspective of linguists) "as if language and languages were a negligible or at best minor aspect of communication" (p. 215).

The text introduces some of the key concepts in intercultural communication as traditionally presented in (North American) courses and textbooks, namely the study of differences between cultures, as represented in the works and theories of Edward Hall (1959) and Geert Hofstede (1980). The perspective presented here is that, despite changes brought on by globalization, demographic shifts, and Internet communication, there still exist identifiable cultural characteristics associated with nation-states and particular social groups. However, the default norms and behaviors derived from being part of a national culture in no way determine an individual's cultural and personal identity, which increasingly is complex, derived from many different sources. Moreover, individuals may resist adopting certain values of the culture in which they were raised or they may be members of ethnic or regional

groups which hold different values and exhibit contrasting behaviors from the majority. While distinctions such as individualism versus collectivism can be helpful in some contexts, they are less useful in describing or predicting individual behavior. National (or ethnic) characteristics and comparisons oversimplify the increasingly complex and fluid nature of identity formation today.

As the title of this text implies, the operating assumption throughout is that language and culture are inseparable and need to be understood contextually. Traditionally, culture and language have been treated as monolithic entities, comprised of discrete sets of knowledge and skills, which are enacted by an individual. As in other fields within the humanities and social sciences, that view has changed significantly in recent decades, with the so-called "social turn" in a variety of disciplines (Hawkins, 2013, pp. 1-2; Block, 2007, p. 31). Culture and language are increasingly seen from socially situated perspectives. That emphasis is maintained here, with an exploration of how people use language (and other means) to create, maintain, and change identities. Culture is treated as socially constructed, not as a set of fixed values and behaviors. Although some attention is paid to the mechanics of language, the principal emphasis is on language use in social settings. This includes areas of intersections of language and culture such as speech communities, social language codes, conversational analysis, speech acts, and cultural schemas.

Another key concern is the role of technology today in communication and identity formation. The availability of networked communication tools and services has changed dramatically how humans communicate and interact with each other. While traditional Internet access is not universally available, mobile devices are becoming ubiquitous almost everywhere, supplying the means for electronic messaging and information retrieval that affect all areas of human activity including commerce, education, health care, journalism, and social/political institutions of all kinds. The ease of communicating brings the possibility of connecting electronically with people in far-flung locations. This has enabled the rise of communities of interest which span geographically and culturally diverse communities. The potential for cooperation and shared endeavors is tremendous, but, given different communication styles and strategies, so is the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. This makes the need for intercultural communication competence all the more necessary.

Each of the text units concludes with a set of practical recommendations for implementing in personal use, both online and in face-to-face encounters, some of the concepts and behaviors presented. The recommendations attempt to highlight useful information in the three areas traditionally seen as constituting intercultural communicative competence, namely knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Following the "Intercultural Knowledge and Confidence Value Rubric," developed by the AACU, "knowledge" here references both cultural self-awareness and knowledge of other cultures, including their "history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices" (Rhodes, 2010). The position advocated in this text is that in fact intercultural learning is also a journey of self-discovery, about one's own cultural identity. The "skills" needed are first in the area of competence and proficiency

in verbal and nonverbal communication. Speaking a second language provides a necessary, but not sufficient, entry into another culture. Beyond the linguistic knowledge, an understanding of the cultural enactments of language use is needed, i.e., an understanding of language pragmatics - how language is used in real, everyday situations. This can be seen as "cultural literacy", a familiarity with the rules and conventions of a culture and the ability to navigate among them appropriately. An equally important skill is the ability to interpret intercultural experiences from an empathetic and thoughtful perspective, going beyond superficial stereotyping and looking at people as individuals, not types. This necessitates avoiding snap judgments and easy categorizations, and instead, critically examining one's own instincts and values. In terms of attitudes, a spirit of openness and curiosity is needed. Learning to be interculturally competent does not mean one has to give up personal beliefs and values, but it does necessitate accepting that others have the right to their own strongly-held perspectives and worldviews. Needed as well as a willingness to seek out and explore those other perspectives.

The chapters of this text are by no means exhaustive treatises on the topics covered. They are short introductions, with the hope that the student-reader will gain enough interest to follow up by seeking more information on the topics. There are recommended links included in each chapter for that purpose. One source which is referenced repeatedly deserves a brief note of explanation. A good number of TED talks are listed, as they often provide entertaining and informative explorations or illustrations of the concepts discussed. Moreover, they represent stable, reliable resources, likely to continue to be accessible (in contrast to many hyperlinks). They feature transcripts and subtitles provided in multiple languages, as well as low band-width versions. These are important considerations for a set of resources intended for use by students from a variety of countries. TED talks have been criticized for being slickly produced "edutainment", providing a platform for "experts" who may exaggerate the significance of findings, sometimes qualifying as innovative breakthroughs, what has long been known or has been debunked by others. They are suggested here as resources, not because they represent the most up-to-date or accurate research in a given field, but rather because they can stimulate discussions, including discoveries about alternative views to those presented.

In any course on intercultural communication, critical reception of media and ideas about culture, language, and technology (the content of many of the TED talks) should be an essential component. Another rationale for incorporating TED talks is the importance of storytelling in intercultural communication. Many of the talks focus on personal insights or developments around an epiphany of some kind. Along with other kinds of stories (for example, language autobiographies), the narratives presented in TED talks can be used to explore the nature of narration and the dynamics of identity formation.

I need to conclude this preface by thanking those who have contributed to this text. At the same time, the ultimate responsibility for the content rests with me. Comments and corrections are very welcome, addressed to [rgjones@vcu.edu](mailto:rgjones@vcu.edu). Thanks go to Dorothy Chun, UC Barbara, for her encouragement, to the VCU Cabell



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