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SIETAR Journal **Kulturelle Vielfalt in Europa**
Cultural Diversity in Europe



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Understanding Others

An Interview with Patrick Boylan

Friederike v. Denffer

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How is it possible for people from different cultures to really understand each other? To get the opinion of a linguist, SIETAR Journal interviewed a leading scholar of Intercultural Communication (IC) in Europe, Patrick Boylan, professor of English Linguistics at the University of Rome III in Italy, a graduate in psychology from Saint Mary's College in his native California, with a D.E.S. from the University of Paris IV (Sorbonne) in linguistics and stylistics.

SIETAR Journal Professor Boylan, experience shows that different cultures give different meanings to what appear superficially to be the same concepts. A typical example is the word »report«: when bosses with mixed-culture staffs ask for a report on the economic situation, their American employees produce sheets of data; their German employees, sheets of data with an analysis; and their French employees, sheets of analyses and conjectures. Each employee has a culturally-determined idea of what a report should be like and produces one similar to that. With abstract words like »punctuality« or »ethical«, the divergences are even greater. How then can two people from different cultures really understand each other? Why isn't it enough to use a common language – for example, English?

Boylan Such as we're doing now, you mean? By the way, let me begin by apologizing to you and to your readers for using English in this interview – my schoolbook German is too rusty for this occasion. I hope to improve it for a future interview. German, you know, is going to be the leading language in Europe, as linguistic history shows. But maybe we can talk about the future of German later on. Let me answer the question you just asked me first.

So, are you and I really understanding each other now, thanks to the use of a common idiom: English? Well, yes – but only because we're speaking conventionally. If we move on to emotional issues or personal convictions, maybe not. It's like a conversation between strangers – both native speakers – in a train compartment. Initially they are polite, say conventional things and understand each other perfectly – or so it seems. Because as soon as they begin to touch on more deeply felt subjects, they start having trouble explaining their ideas and quibble over words. Yet both speak the same language!

Looking under the surface, then, I'd have to say no, I don't think you and I **really** understand each other now. But since we're being polite and conventional, it doesn't show. What will happen when our discussion gets »hot«? Well, that will depend on how well we use this initial goodwill phase to learn each other's »inner language«, through empathic dialogue based on IC (Intercultural Communication) techniques. If we are successful, we will acquire a capacity to understand each other from each other's stand-

point. This will assure reciprocal understanding when we move on to discuss deeply felt subjects, values, convictions, identities and so on.

SIETAR Journal Please tell readers in a more detailed way why we can't have reciprocal understanding right from the beginning, without the work of learning the other person's »inner language«? After all, we are speaking a common language – English.

Boylan Because words mean only what the person using them intends them to mean. Two people can use the same English word but give it different meanings, as your example of the word »report« shows: I ask for a »report« to get the facts but my French assistant gives me a »rapport« full of interpretations of the facts, because that is how s/he was taught to write one at school. And so I feel misunderstood, because if I had wanted **that**, I would have asked for a »survey« or an »in-depth report«. But for my French assistant a report is not a report if there is no personal reflection.

Of course, since you're using English as a non-native but one who is fully immersed in American culture – I can really hear it! –, there will automatically be a high degree of reciprocal understanding between us. Not total, but very high, because in using a word, we are both intending it to mean what it means generally within a given culture (American culture, in our case).

In the same way, there would be no confusion about the word »report« if, in the situation you described initially, everyone spoke either (1.) American English or (2.) High German the way **you** speak them, that is, from within their respective cultures. Let's take the first case: both managers and staff use American English **culturally**. If, say, a French manager asks for a »report«, then her employees know she wants sheets of data, not ideas – otherwise, since she thinks in English like an American, she would have asked for a »survey«. And the same holds in the second case: since both managers and staff think in German, if the French manager asks for a *Bericht*, employees will know she wants not just data and not just ideas but a mixture. There is no confusion because **everyone** is using the same language with the same cultural mind set. Unfortunately most people do not learn second languages **culturally**, as mind sets, because languages are considered to be sets of grammar rules. This means, to continue with the second case, that, hearing the manager ask for a *Bericht* and knowing German only grammatically, an American employee may interpret the word as »report« (after all, that's what his dictionary says) and produce the wrong thing.

This is not much of a problem because a boss can see the misunderstanding from the sheets of paper and tell the employees what the word *Bericht* really means (in German culture) and how to write one in the future. The big problem

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comes from cultural differences that are not apparent, and so never come out into the open. Yet they continue to disrupt understanding. Let me give you an example.

Claire Kramsch (2001:17) has shown how the word »privilege« means different things for typical German, French and American speakers. For Germans – at least those who feel part of a *Leistungsgesellschaft*, – the word means *the advantage you earn* (through endeavour). For the French the word means *the advantage you deserve* (because of some natural right). For Americans the word means *the advantage you obtain* (by joining a particular group). The differences are, at first glance, secondary. But in a heated discussion, they can lead to serious misunderstandings that are hard to clear up because each party is unaware of what the word really means for the others (and is maybe not consciously aware of what the word **really** means for himself or herself).

So a common language will assure a good degree of reciprocal understanding but only on the condition that both speakers, whether non-native or native, **feel** and **understand** the culture underlying it. Just understanding or just feeling is not enough.

A common language: a great help but...

I said »a good degree« of understanding, but not 100%. This is because critical incidents could still occur even if you and I were **both** native speakers and had a common culture we both felt and understood. Because we would not necessarily share the same **sub**-cultures.

You know this from common experience: when people of the same culture but opposite sex meet in some romantic setting, they often think they understand each other perfectly. But in fact each of them is understanding something slightly different, because one belongs to the male sub-culture and the other belongs to the female sub-culture; not only, but perhaps one belongs to a working class sub-culture and the other to a tertiary professional sub-culture, and so on. These differences do not come out into the open immediately, however, because the two behave conventionally – at least, initially. Sometimes only after months of living together does one partner suddenly discover what the other partner **really** means by words like »clean«, »love«, »funny« and so on.

So, you see, in a sense, **all** communication is intercultural. Or, at least, whenever people have a substantially different *Erlebnis* (situated experience), to use Dilthey's term. Women and men, bosses and workers, adults and children all have a substantially different *Erlebnis*; so when they communicate, they, too, need to use the techniques of IC, to avoid misunderstandings and to say things convincingly for the other party. Using the same language is a great help but not enough.

SIETAR Journal Well, what are these techniques? What kind of strategies can people develop to really understand each other, besides learning the other party's language culturally?

Boylan The easiest strategy is one many multi or transnational companies use with their mixed-culture employees. They eliminate the problem by eliminating differences through Uniform Company Policy – like the »melting pot« strategy used in the United States with immigrants.

Take, for example, people's titles. If a team leader's name is Mario Rossi and he is an electronics engineer, an Italian would call him »Engineer Rossi«, a French person »Mr. Rossi«, and an American just »Mario«. To eliminate these differences a Uniform Policy statement might specify: *When addressing immediate superiors, use family names only* (»Rossi«). This reduces possible misunderstandings. Employees cannot seem »too familiar« or »overly formal« with their immediate superiors because there is only one way to say things: the Company way. Another protocol could define what »clean« means on the shop floor. How litter-free must the floor be to qualify as »clean«? Different cultures have different opinions so a Uniform Policy statement would provide specifications. This is like getting employees to use a common language (German, English...) **learned culturally**, except in this case the language would be an artificial company idiom meant to be »neutral«, with no provision for sub-cultures (well, not officially).

This policy does indeed reduce misunderstandings but it creates another problem: it makes employees less creative. They are seldom themselves. This may be tolerable if they are doing menial tasks. But if the company needs the creative brain power of its employees and wants to get the benefits of intercultural synergy, then it has to let these people express themselves in their own »inner language« (through the medium of whatever common external repertory is used in the company: English, German...). In other words, Italian employees have to be left free to use English or German to express, for example, what they mean in Italian by »pulita« (»a one-pass cleaning«, a »once over«).

SIETAR Journal That may be fine for making people feel »free«, but how can misunderstandings be prevented if every employee uses words according to the »inner meaning« that these words have acquired in his or her native culture? Doesn't this contradict your first principle: employees should learn to use a common language **culturally**?

Boylan Just a minute. I said that the employees should be left free to use words as they felt; but I didn't say they end up doing so.

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SIETAR Journal So how can the company keep them from creating a Tower of Babel?

Boylan By giving them a knowledge of what »intercultural communication« means. And also a knowledge of what »language« means. This knowledge will enable them to freely limit their use of language in such a way that their interlocutor really understands them. They adapt to each situation and say what works for every interlocutor, because they understand that interlocutor's culture and know how to »render« their »inner language« with an external expression that the interlocutor will truly understand. They do not **deny** their inner self (as they must with a Uniform Policy), they learn to translate it.

That is precisely the difference between teaching employees to use a commonly shared language (German, English...), learned culturally, and an artificial company idiom meant to be »neutral«. The company idiom is a straitjacket. It depersonalizes you. But learning to translate your »inner self« into a commonly-shared language – for example, French, American English, whatever – is creative. And you remain yourself, or rather the person you would be if you had been born in France or America. In a company with a Uniform Policy there is only one way to call your superior: »Rossi«. But in a company using American English as the *lingua franca*, you – as the somewhat conservative German you seem to be – could call him initially »Mr. Rossi« and if he says »Just call me Mario« and you don't like being on such familiar terms, you could invent another strategy. For example, you could call him »M.R.« (Mario Rossi) which is a custom in large American companies, one that approaches familiarity but without using first names. Or, jokingly, you could use, in »fractured English«, the title he is used to in Italian: »Engineer«. Which could become »E.R.« (»Engineer Rossi«) when you get to know him better. Or you could give him a semi-formal nickname: »Ross« that rhymes with »boss«. Whatever. Using a natural language, you can elaborate the relationship you desire through the language you create. That creativity spills over, then, into your work relationship and your general attitude toward life in the company.

Language beyond words

SIETAR Journal Are you saying that merely knowing the meaning of the words »language« and »intercultural communication« will do all this? I don't see how. Besides, people already know what these words mean!

Boylan What does »language« mean, then?

SIETAR Journal One commonly used meaning is the system we're using now to speak. The system of words and grammar rules. The code that we use to codify our messages and then transmit them to someone else.

Boylan Well, that's a good definition of the kind of language that computers use. SQL or any database query language is the same on each computer linked in a network; database queries are codified in a certain way by one machine, sent over a cable, and then decodified by the receiving machine in the inverse way, with no ambiguity possible.

But this is not the way humans communicate. This is not a good definition of human language.

SIETAR Journal So could you then please explain an adequate definition of human language.

Boylan Let me take again the example of a man and a woman who meet in a romantic setting, think they understand each other, get married and discover only after months and months what the other person **really** means by words like »love«, »funny«, »late«, »we« and so on. Take the word »we«; in some cases, the husband discovers **only** with time that when the wife says »we« she means herself and her family or ethnic group – and her husband, too, but only insofar as he acts as a loyal member of her group. Note that I'm not talking about complicated words like »democracy«, »justice«, »friendship« about which books have been written. I'm talking about the most common everyday words possible. People who use these words still misunderstand each other because human language is **not** codified uniformly in every head, like SQL in every computer.

That's no problem, of course: as long as people keep things superficial, they have the illusion of perfect understanding. Indeed, some cynics say that marriages last longest when spouses learn **not** to ask questions. That is, when they choose to avoid a profound relationship that exposes them to discovering differences in meanings that they are perhaps not prepared to accept. This is not **my** philosophy; but it illustrates a truth: two people never share completely the same ethos (what I called »sub-cultures« before).

No, humans are not computers. And language is not a ready-made code that you automatically use to transmit thoughts. Language is a deeply sedimented mass of intents, shaped over time by an individual's interactions with a given community. Language is a »will to mean« that, initially, two interlocutors do **not** share entirely and must discover in each other through empathic interaction.

And language does not even necessarily take the form of words. Indeed, it makes use of whatever materials it can find to manifest itself. Deaf children cannot hear words so their »will to mean« seeks other channels to express itself. For example, they begin to gesture with ever more conscious intent, if they find, in the environment, adults who seem to be interacting meaningfully by gesturing back. These children acquire a Sign Language, which is not the gestural translation of spoken words but rather a representational system of its own, different from – but as comple-

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te as – a verbal language like High German.

The material diversity of verbal and gestural systems proves that language is something **other** than words or hand movements: it is the force that created and maintains verbal or gestural repertoires as semiotic systems, i.e. as a means for making the »will to mean« of the members of a community visible and intelligible.

SIETAR Journal That's curious. First you said that I was wrong in defining language as words and grammar rules and you said that language was a »will to mean«. But you just called the gestures of deaf people a »language« like High German. Is Sign Language a language? Is High German a language?

Boylan No, they are not. I used the word »language« in speaking of them because it's what people say and I didn't want to get complicated. But technically they are semiotic systems, repertoires of words or gestures: I should have said the »High German Repertory« and the »Sign Repertory«. As for High German as a **language**, as the expressive force you feel inside you, it is not a repertory of signs but an accumulation of intents, a 'will to mean' in a particular way shaped by the repeated interaction with your community and which uses an external repertory of words or gestures to manifest itself.

I realize this definition of »language« sounds strange, but if you have doubts, just consider this example. You have probably met many foreigners who speak German in a way that is perfectly grammatical and »pragmatically appropriate«, yet who still sound strange. If the »German language« were just a set of words, grammar rules and pragmatic norms, they would not sound strange. But since they do, »German« must be something else.

SIETAR Journal What else?

Boylan A particular, historically constituted »will to mean«. A way of being, and, through that, a way of describing and acting upon the world. You have probably met another kind of foreigner, too, one who speaks German making occasional grammatical and pronunciation errors, yet who talks with a real German mind set or *Weltanschauung*. After a while, you don't even notice the errors, right? You understand him readily and he sounds convincing because he »speaks your language« in the deep sense of this expression.

SIETAR Journal Okay. You mean that the German words of this foreigner are NOT what makes him appear to speak »German«; they are only an outer shell: German is the spirit that guides the way he uses those words. In fact, he could use hand gestures instead of words and he would still seem to speak German. Whereas in the previous case – the foreig-

ners who speak grammatically but still sound strange – the spirit guiding the way they use words is, say, an Italian or Turkish one. They are, in reality, speaking Italian or Turkish using German words and grammatical rules. That is why they are less understandable. And that is why »language« is not words and grammatical rules.

Boylan Precisely. More than »spirit«, which takes us back to the nineteenth century, I prefer saying »will to mean«. Language is your »will to mean«.

Applying theory

SIETAR Journal OK, you have clarified the idea of »language«, so let's return to our topic. What can people do to understand each other if they come from different cultures? What should a company do to promote effective internal and external communication and to avoid imposing Uniform Policies on everyone?

Boylan Actually, I still haven't clarified what intercultural communication means...

SIETAR Journal Um, well, there are space restrictions in the journal, you know. So... so can you say what intercultural communication means in just a few words?

Boylan Not really.

SIETAR Journal Because I would indeed like you to give a practical answer to the questions I just repeated instead of more theoretical explanations...

Boylan But only if employees really understand – and that means theoretically – what »language« and »intercultural communication« mean, will they be able **freely** – without Company Policy Statements – to adapt their talk to people of different cultures. I realize that theory is often boring and a waste of time. But that's **self-centred** theory. **Productive** theory is different, it helps you decide creatively what to do in practical circumstances, so you don't need a list of rules.

So imagine that you are the head of the Training Department in a multinational. You want to organize language classes for your international managers: what will you tell your teachers to do?

SIETAR Journal Well, on the basis of what we said about »language«, I wouldn't tell them to concentrate on grammar rules and vocabulary, that's for sure!! Even the usual 'dialogue' exercises are insufficient because they treat language as words to be repeated, there's no 'will to mean anything'. The same applies to the usual *Landeskunde* explanations:

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they get you to understand the cultural differences but not to feel them. And, as you said, just understanding (or just feeling) is not enough.

Boylan Right. And thus the importance of »theorizing« language: it can help you understand why traditional language courses produce mediocre results. And why traditional Intercultural Communication training seldom manages to change trainees' habits. On the positive side, now: what would you tell teachers to **do**?

SIETAR Journal I would tell the teachers to get the students to start »thinking« like the people they will be communicating with. More than thinking: trying to **feel** the same things, **wanting** the same things. Because language, we said, is a »desire to shape the world in a certain way« to express oneself.

Boylan That's right.

SIETAR Journal Except I don't know what this means in practice. How can you teach people to »will« things differently, in order to mean things differently?

Boylan Well, now that you have got the idea, you'll be able to invent appropriate exercises. Feel free to borrow the ones I describe on my web site, for example in the paper »Seeing and Saying Things in English«, at – or just enter and follow the links.

Teaching languages means teaching learners to want differently. This is the key to learning a language **culturally**, for intercultural communication. It guarantees understanding because both speaker and hearer are using not just the same verbal forms but the same inner language. Not completely, of course (because a hearers' inner language includes sub-cultures, too), but to a good degree.

Now if I were to define »intercultural communication« theoretically, you would be able to do even more. For example, create **empathy** with an interlocutor at the beginning of a conversation, in order to map her/his sub-cultures and peculiar *Erlebnis* landscape: the source of her/his idiolect. And you'll need to understand and use that idiolect when the conversation gets »hot«.

SIETAR Journal Of course, time has run out just when we're getting to the best part! And you were also going to say something about the future of German, weren't you?

Boylan It's an old entertainer's trick, you know: »Always leave them asking for more!« In any case, as for **empathy**, the best things are written in German: Edith Stein, Husserl and, of course, Gadamer.

And as for the future of German, I recommend reading what Antonio Gramsci says about how languages acquire hegemony through a dialectic between the economic power of the people who speak them, and the winning ideologies they manage to elaborate. American English has proven this insight to be true on the world scene. And for historical reasons it is easy to predict that, within Europe, it will be German, not British (or American) English, that will triumph precisely for the reasons Gramsci gives. The French will also compete, of course, and intelligently: they are strong on inventing winning ideologies – but not strong enough economically. Anyway, if you like, we can talk about this as well, another time.

SIETAR Journal Thank you for this interview.

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