

Seeking Boundedness through Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

People do not live in isolation; they live in communities which are not always homogeneous. Planet earth has had tremendous migration of people across the globe for survival (two main reasons being fleeing war-torn countries and religious intolerance), identity, ecological reasons, etc. In the 18th century, the industrial revolution contributed immensely to the migration of people which led to people of different races and ethnicities coming into contact and having to learn to co-exist. This led to power struggles, politics and segregation along mostly racial lines and later ethnic and linguistic lines. Conflict ensued as the underlying processes of “the other” were embedded in most linguistic interaction attempts. Even so, the need to co-exist was unavoidable, hence there was language change, which led to the creation of pidgin (a simplified form of communication between speakers of different languages) and creole (formed from different languages and ending up being a fully-fledged language). In some cases, language change inevitably led to language shift. Globalisation had a ripple effect in channelling people to engage and it bridged the gap by breaking new ground in dispelling negative perceptions of those who were viewed as different as it brought interconnectedness. Intercultural communication has since gained traction, however, the fourth industrial revolution could upset the status quo if people lose sight of what is important and fail to intercede to restore linguistic rapport.

Keywords: Industrial Revolution, Globalisation, Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Introduction

Interaction through language is one of the rudimentary means of fostering relations among people. How people use language is a microcosm of society as it demonstrates whether there is boundedness or exclusion since language can be utilised to bond or to exclude people. This goes back to a period after the second world war when relations between the ‘settled community’ and the new arrivals of immigrants to western countries like France, the United Kingdom and West Germany were forced to navigate their way on foreign territories whilst trying to help rebuild these countries to their former glory (De Fina, Schiffin & Bamberg, 2006). Most of the immigrants spoke a different language or a different variety from the settled community. The same phenomenon was common in other countries and communities after battles or wars. The new arrivals who were often captured or had come as economic migrants had a culture (which is comprised of ideas, customs and values) which was also often different from that of the settled community, and these differences sowed divisions which resulted in the immigrant community being thrust to the periphery of society. Hogan (2007) describes such behaviour as ethnocentrism (displaying a negative attitude towards others), which results from lack of intercultural communication when one group ends up putting up barriers that prohibit others from being co-opted into the mainstream community. Such perceptions tend to lead to displacement of communities (who often had to flee to other countries to seek asylum where they may suffer further intolerance as an immigrant community). In their desperate quest to assimilate in their host country, their language and culture often become obsolete as they lose self-identity. Assimilation can have positive results if both groups encompass change, but if only one group changes its norms and way of life (this is often the experience of the new arrivals), then there is bound to be disharmony. A new perception is needed to redefine assimilation because history has hidden the truth about what was referred to as assimilation when some communities tried to destroy other group’s cultures under the guise of assimilation.

Generally, societies are diverse, and that is where the term multicultural comes from, and it is used to emphasise the heterogeneous nature of most communities. In a multicultural community, each culture has traits which might hinder intercultural communication. However, culture is not innate and can be

negotiated, which means that some cultural norms can be permeated to allow fluid intercultural communication (Hogan, 2007). If the need to co-exist supersedes cultural differences, then a community would be in a better position to interact as they no longer view the other party as being on the opposite end of the spectrum. Navigating the path of multicultural societies through intercultural communication on the global stage is paramount in curbing loss of lives, especially in unstable and war-torn countries. Sarbaugh (1988) is of the view that in order for people to integrate, they need to understand the fundamental concepts and attributes of communication and culture. It is of paramount importance to break down linguistic boundaries as they often lead to disharmony; this can be achieved by seeking linguistic boundedness that is all encompassing and which promotes 'oneness' through intercultural communication. Global interaction must be devoid of alienation, but rather align with the views of Samovar & Porter (1994: 7) which posit that 'communication is a form of human interaction that is derived from a need to connect and interact with other human beings.' Intercultural communication makes people converge to seek common ground. Seeking communication across cultures can avert negative traits as this is the tool that underpins boundedness on a global scale.

Differences in culture can contribute to 'mismanaged' rapport, which can underpin a myriad of problems if not addressed to restore semblance (Spencer-Oatley, 2000: 145). Culture and language are interlinked as both can be utilised to bring communities together, or to separate them. Focus on linguistic traits that highlight what makes people different rather than what makes them similar is proof that language is a powerful tool that can be used to disempower, segregate, dispossess, malign, disadvantage, etc. Conversely, language can also be used to intercede where there is separateness (Neuliep, 2009). Language is the bedrock of intercultural communication; hence it is the tool that is utilised to resolve conflicts in communities, in nations and in the global village, especially in war-torn countries. A case in point is the United Nations which intercedes through dialogues where there are conflicts in different countries. Boundedness in language is an integral part of human existence, which Neuliep (2000: 8) defines as 'the ability to symbolise; it separates humans from animals.' The underlying message in Neuliep's definition is that language is critical to human beings as it can be used to repair, to empower, to build and to align. Interacting and seeking boundedness in spite of linguistic and cultural differences can defuse tensions and misunderstanding as overtones of disengagement can be diffused through embracing intercultural communication across all spheres.

Background and Context to the Study

Many studies have been conducted on intercultural communication where some researchers analysed the same topic from different perspectives. Neuliep produced the 7th edition on 'Intercultural communication,' which was published in 2017. Different studies have analysed different linguistic and cultural concepts which impact human interaction. Such interest indicates that there are underlying processes that need to be addressed to uncover overt and covert behaviour in communication. Heterogeneous communities have existed internationally, nationally and even in small communities as a result of different cultures having to share physical space, thus forcing them to interact. Speaking different code systems has played a major role in boosting or hindering intercultural communication. Most societies in different parts of the world operate at some level of separateness, be it on race, class, education, religion, gender, culture or language. Focus on any of these divergent traits puts emphasis on difference and not on similarity. An attitude towards a person, whether perceived or experienced, automatically influences how they react towards that person (McKaiser, 2015). This means that people's perceptions of others can be deep rooted in their unconscious mind. Intercultural communication is one fundamental concept that can help correct misconstrued ideas about what is assumed to be barriers in a heterogeneous group. One way of testing this hypothesis is to conduct interviews to determine underlying processes that contribute to cultural disharmony. From this, lessons can be learned that would assimilate communities through intercultural communication. There are countries that have suppressed many regional languages; which led to the extinction of some languages and the near death of others like the Khoisan language in South Africa. The Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) was introduced in South Africa in 1996 to revive languages that were marginalised during apartheid (a system that segregated people based on race). PANSALB's main role was to put 'marginalised languages' on par with formerly dominant languages (Thamm, 2016). On closer inspection, progress has been slow as more than 20 years after democracy, 11 languages were declared official languages (1996 Constitution). However, there is no parity as some languages seem to be still

on the periphery. This has affected intercultural communication as some communities are still fighting for their languages to be utilised in mainstream media like television programmes.

A lot of harm and trauma has occurred throughout the world resulting mainly from racial and linguistic differences. South Africa is a black majority country, however, the Afrikaans speakers (white) who are a minority, wanted to enforce their language on speakers of other languages. They went to the extent of making a declaration that Afrikaans was going to be the language of learning and teaching on a 50/50 basis alongside English which is a lingua franca because it is spoken in most countries either as a second language or as a foreign language. This resulted in students' resistance of an enforced minority language which had always been associated with apartheid, to now cross over to the education system. To show their stance, students marched through the streets of Soweto (the biggest township in South Africa) on 16 June 1976 where a number of young lives were lost when white policemen came and fired live ammunition at students who were participating in a peaceful march. The picture of Hector Pieterse being carried by another student in his arms to a place of safety made world news (South African history online, towards *a people's history* – accessed on 01 February 2019). He was one of the first victims to die of gun shot by the police.

Resistance towards Afrikaans gained traction in the years following the 1976 students march because people were against segregation since they wanted to integrate as a nation, regardless of race, religion or culture. During the minority white rule, people were grouped according to ethnicity and language (Deprez & Du Plessis, 2000). Throughout the world, languages of minorities suffer at the expense of dominant languages. Interestingly, this was not the case in South Africa as segregation based on language and ethnicity was the norm under apartheid which was the white minority rule. Enforcing separateness heightened emotions which led to a peaceful march that drew international attention.



Figure 1: Sam Nzima took the picture of 13-year-old Hector Pieterse as he was carried to safety by Mbuyisa Makhubo. (The picture made headlines across the world – accessed online on 31 January 2019).

Method and Materials

Triangulation was utilised to capture data from different dimensions of the population. The essence was to engage with different participants to get the views of a diverse number of the population so that the results would be more representative of the whole population. It also served to analyse the underlying opinions embedded in the participants' responses in order to gauge their overall understanding of intercultural communication. A questionnaire was drafted so that the different participants would answer the same questions to enable the researcher to gauge whether they would

have the same opinions when presented with a similar situation. Unstructured interviews served to further probe the basis of preconceived notions and current opinions held on the issues that impact the participants' lives. The researcher applied random sampling to avoid bias, therefore, participants came from different walks of life (the participants were made up of males/females; young/old; in work/unemployed/retired; black/white; educated/uneducated) so that the results would be a fair representation of the community and not just a particular group.

Some questions were answered by individuals on a one to one basis in the form of unstructured interviews. A focus group engaged in fundamental concepts underlying intercultural communication, which prompted a lively discussion on enculturation and assimilation. Another angle was brought in through observations so that messages from non-verbal communication in a diverse focus group could be factored in. Non-verbal communication covered different forms of communication like proxemics (use of space), kinesics (body language), paralanguage (hesitation, tone and facial expression), etc.

- What do you understand by intercultural communication?
- Do you associate with people from different cultures?
- If not, why is this the case?
- Is there any chance that the above case of non-interaction with people from different cultures will change?
 - Why?
 - If you associate with people from different cultures, how long has this been the case?
 - Where does the interaction happen and under what circumstances?
 - Conflict is a clash of interest or serious disagreement among any group of people (family, acquaintances, colleagues, strangers, etc.) Have you ever labelled conflict with someone as cultural conflict?
 - Why/Why not?
 - Do you think first world countries, developing countries and third world countries face the same barriers in intercultural communication?
 - What proof supports this view?
 - Would you say there is more intercultural communication between people of the same race who reside in different parts of the world, or is there better intercultural communication between nationals who come from different racial backgrounds?
 - Why do you think this would be the case?
 - What role do physical boundaries (example, border gates) play in human interaction?
 - What about non-physical boundaries like age and gender?
 - Can barriers entrenched in the psyche during early childhood be removed?
 - How would this be possible/How would this not be possible?
 - What impact does education have if any on human relations?
 - People tend to hold strong views on religion and politics. Do this influence integration?
 - If not, what tool do they apply to enforce non-integration?
 - If so, to what extent and what fosters this integration?
 - According to you, is there better intercultural communication in the 21st century compared to decades or even centuries ago?
 - What are you basing your answer on?
 - What would you recommend as a strategy to deal with intercultural barriers?
 - Globalisation connects different parts of the world, especially through the utilisation of technology via social media (facebook, twitter, blogs, youtube, instagram, etc.). – Does this contribute positively towards intercultural communication?
 - The fourth industrial revolution is changing the world at an alarming rate – What are its impact on intercultural communication?

Results

Participants shared conflicting encounters in a heterogeneous group. Kinesics is one aspect that often leads to miscommunication when people of different cultures interact as body language can convey different meanings to different people. Miscommunication in such cases is generally influenced by lived experiences which could be interpersonal, structural or institutional. These lead people to put

up barriers in intercultural communication overtly or covertly. Culture manifests itself in language and in social-markers like class, religion, education, gender, values and norms. Social ills have become profound as a result of lack of cultural and linguistic integration. The changing global village has become interconnected and has changed interaction among different cultures through globalisation. The fourth industrial revolution has further changed interactions where the global community is forging new identities.

Discussion

The majority of participants defined intercultural communication as differences in interaction brought about by race and language. Others extended the definition to include religion, class, attitude and values, but they still viewed race and language as paramount tools in communication. For a long time, countries have been divided by borders as a form of exclusion. Boundaries have and are still used to separate places and people. Interestingly, there are boundaries that are subtle as they are not as clear-cut as physical boundaries that separate countries/nationalities in the form of borders, walls and fences and these are culture and language. Such boundaries can lead to group solidarity where language and culture are used to exclude others and if the boundaries are not permeable, then intercultural communication will encounter resistance. Some forms of communication are culture specific, whereby usage of certain forms is employed unconsciously. Understanding such forms can diffuse situations which would otherwise be fraught with tension, hence there is a need to embark on progressive systemic change nationally and internationally. Society must not be complacent about cultural differences, but must engage proactively with similarities between cultures as well as differences.

Conclusion

The moral fibre of the global village will be enhanced by honest dialogues that culminate in seeking ways to better understand each other so that intercultural communication will bind everyone together. The many facets of confusion and conflict can be overcome if all stakeholders opt for openness towards cultural integration and reconciliation. With mass media and the fourth industrial revolution bringing the world together, an inclusive global village is envisaged where boundaries become redundant as the world seems to condense as it challenges the spacio-social domain.

Recommendations

Human beings across the globe need to guard against prejudice and stereotype so that there would be no complacency when breaking new ground in intercultural communication. There should be active global collaboration towards social justice in order to break the mould of separateness in human interaction.

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