

***ON 'INTERCULTURALITY': A REVIEW OF RESEARCH APPLYING
ETHNOMETHODOLOGY TO THE STUDY OF INTERCULTURAL
INTERACTIONS.***

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Abstract

This paper discusses previous research which has applied an ethnomethodological approach to the study of 'intercultural communication'. Particular attention is paid to the work of Nishizaka (1995) and Mori (2003). In examining the themes and focuses of such research, it will become apparent that 'interculturality' tends to be operationalised in one of two ways, as either (1) the making relevant the 'foreignness' of one or more of the interactants, or (2) the associating of one or more interactants with knowledge of specific national cultural items, such as food. It will be argued that both of these operationalisations are potentially problematic. In closing, possible similarities and differences between the work discussed and my own PhD research will be considered.

Keywords: *interculturality, intercultural communication, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, identity.*

1. Introduction

Research on intercultural communication (ICC) which treats culture and ‘interculturality’ as a given fact from which analyses should begin is increasingly being questioned.

Such traditional notions of ICC are exemplified by Scollon and Scollon (2001), who explain how individuals from different cultural groups communicate differently as a consequence of their different worldviews and norms of behaviour. Throughout their textbook, they provide (imaginary) examples of interactions between Westerners (typically American) and Easterners (usually Chinese) who misunderstand one another and miscommunicate as a result of their cultural differences.

While Scollon and Scollon acknowledge that not all intercultural encounters go wrong, and that there are potential problems of *a priori* researcher bias in ICC, others who conduct research in the area have been more careless. For example, the editorial of a recent edition of the *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* stated that “during intercultural communication, the message sent is *usually* not the message received” and that “intercultural communication *necessarily* involves a clash of communicator style” (emphasis added, Neuliep 2006, p.1). When one considers the amount of successful international/interethnic/intercultural interactions which occur on a daily basis across the world’s universities, businesses and streets, it is difficult to agree with such claims.

Aside from simple inaccuracies, such positions also have major theoretical and methodological shortcomings, as Nishizaka clearly explains:

When one uses categories like ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘Japanese’ and ‘foreigner’ or whatever as the starting and end point of analysis, as is usual in the case of ‘intercultural communication’ studies, the result is not only to hinder ‘the

human encounter', but to hamper the very 'interculturality' of intercultural communication from being investigated in its own right. (1999, p.236-237)

That is, in assuming that individuals belong to particular cultural groups, and that such group memberships cause communicative behaviours (and subsequently, communicative problems across groups), a researcher is not only imposing his views upon those he is researching, but also ignoring one of the most interesting aspects of interaction – how those involved perceive and treat it.

In fitting with the above argument, there is a body of research (e.g. Nishizaka 1995, 1999; Mori 2003; Zimmerman 2007) which examines interculturality from an ethnomethodological position. That is, treats it not as an *a priori* resource for explanation, but as a topic to be explored in itself. Such research seeks to explore how interactants make relevant, or irrelevant, perceived cultural differences, and to understand how and why this is achieved.

Another major problem with mainstream intercultural communication research is its unclear, often problematic, operationalisation of 'culture', such as the tendency to correlate it with 'nation' (Holliday 1999). This paper will provide a review of the literature which adopts an ethnomethodological approach to interculturality, and explore how the concept of 'culture' is being considered within it. It will be argued that there are still grey areas in how 'culture' is being treated, and that this would become increasingly evident were such treatments applied to other contexts, such as that of my own PhD research, which will explore identity use in online English language chat amongst multinational interactants.

It seems appropriate to begin by considering ethnomethodology and its associated research methods in more detail before examining how it has been applied to the study of intercultural communication.

2. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis

The ethnomethodological approach was first championed by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel (e.g. 1967), and was borne of his reaction against the then-dominant Parsonian paradigm within social research. Garfinkel argued that this dominant paradigm treated social members as ‘cultural dopes’ who do not understand their world, and who social research ‘experts’ need to investigate, understand, define and categorise. In opposition to this, he proposed that the commonsense knowledge of the members themselves is worthy of sociological investigation. As such, ethnomethodology is the study of people’s methods for (co-)constructing and understanding the social order and their place within it. This ‘emic’ perspective places members’ understanding and orientations at the forefront of social research. As such, how this understanding is *displayed* by members in their everyday social (inter)action is of prime importance. Two of the principal means for exploring this are the interconnected methods of conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorization analysis (MCA).

CA (e.g. Sacks 1992; Schegloff 2007) is the study of conversation, or rather, talk-in-interaction. It begins with the understanding that all talk is a social action, that something is achieved with every utterance made by an individual engaged in interaction. In the fine detailed study of talk and its features (such as turn taking, repair, topic organisation and floor management), conversation analysts seek to understand how conversation is seen to be sequentially and socially organised. It is believed that such analysis can provide insight into how those involved demonstrate their moment-by-moment understanding of the context and interaction in which they are involved.

Similarly, MCA is concerned with the common sense knowledge of members, and how such knowledge is organised, demonstrated and accomplished through talk. It is a development of Sacks' (1992) theory of membership category devices (MCDs), which explained how members organise their social world through categories, which can be understood to be linked to particular actions (category bound activities [CBAs]) or characteristics. (For 'categories', one can also read 'identities', such that MCA can seek to explore how identities can be used to achieve social functions in interactions.)

For example, Sacks noted the difference between the 'correctness' and the 'relevance' of applications of categories. Sacks pointed out while that many categories are objectively true, only certain ones will be relevant at any given time (for example, that I am white is correct, but it is not relevant as I write this paper). Further, when a category is made relevant, a whole collection of related categories are subsequently made relevant (when my whiteness becomes relevant, my interlocutor's ethnicity may also).

The notion that identity is not something which one *has*, but is something which one *does*, has gained popularity in recent years (cf. Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Benwell and Stokoe 2006). It begins with the recognition that identities (for one has many identities upon which to draw) are not static and fixed, determined and determining, but are multiple and contestable, and can be made relevant or irrelevant on a moment-to-moment basis.

From here, it should be clear that these approaches and methods can be useful in the study of interculturality. In applying such analyses to interactions between parties of different national, ethnic and linguistic groups, it is possible that an

understanding of how those parties perceive, orient to and treat differences and similarities will emerge. That is, in such research, the emphasis ought not to be on using members' categories or identities to explain their behaviour, or to consider how or whether such identities lead to differences. What ought to be of interest is *how*, *when* and *why* those members themselves make such categories and identities relevant; how they achieve "doing being Japanese" (for example) or "doing cultural differences".

However, it must be acknowledged that it is impossible to confidently determine exactly what participants are thinking and doing in the micro-moments of interaction; researcher interpretation is inevitable. In other words, ethnomethodologists can only interpret their data as they see fit, and these interpretations are open to debate. Of the studies to be discussed here, there appear to be two main ways in which the researchers feel interculturality is being approached by the interactants. These two operationalisations will be discussed and debated in the following two sections.

3. Interculturality as making 'foreignness' relevant

Informed by an ethnomethodological framework, Nishizaka's (1995) often cited work appears to have been the first to offer a new perspective on intercultural communication by examining and considering "how it is that *the fact of being* intercultural is organized as a social phenomenon" (original emphasis, p.302). Examining recorded radio interviews between a Japanese national host and a non-Japanese student (from Sri Lanka), Nishizaka aimed to show how being Japanese is achieved interactively and that 'interculturality' is similarly achieved in the course of

interaction (1999). This, he argued, is done through the topics of talk, as well as through the interactional features of talk.

3.1 Making ‘foreignness’ relevant through the topic of talk

Nishizaka’s approach was inspired by Sacks’ observations on categories, (which were briefly outlined in section 1). While it may be expected that a national categorization of one party would lead to the national categorization of his/her interlocutors, Nishizaka argues that the categories in use in his data are not national (‘Japanese’/‘Sri Lankan’), but ‘Japanese’/‘foreign’. This distinction is important, since here:

‘Japanese’ is not just a member of a collection whose members stand side by side, but rather, together with ‘foreigner’, co-constitutes a pair whose members are contrasted to one another and related asymmetrically. (p.306)

In other words, depending upon context, Japanese and Sri Lankan may or may not be culturally different. Cultural difference is only being made relevant by the interviewer through his treating the student as ‘foreign’. It is the category pair ‘Japanese’/‘foreigner’, Nishizaka argues, that makes interculturality relevant to and in the interaction.

As with subsequent research which applies this approach, Nishizaka also demonstrates how interculturality can be made *irrelevant*. The below extract, in which the interviewer (A) is asking the student (B) about their experiences of living and studying in Japan, illustrates his point:

Excerpt 1

(adapted from Nishizaka 1995, p.308. Original in Japanese; I include only the English gloss for reasons of brevity and clarity. The complete excerpt can be found in the original paper's appendix)

- 1 A: well, what I definitely want to
2 ask is:
3 B: yes.
4 A: u::h studying japanese, alright?
5 B: yes.
6 A: and speaking to japanese people,
7 [alright?
8 B: [yes.
9 A: then, sometimes don't you find
10 what they are saying difficult
11 to understand?
12 [I wonder.
13 B: [yes, I do.
14 yes, I do. sure, I do.
15 A: yes.
16 B: that is, in my company I work
16 for, and I work
17 [now.
18 A: [yes, yes.
19 B: in that company, that is a
20 construction company,
21 A: =yes.
22 B: there are used many technical
23 words.
24 A: =o, technical terms.

- 25 [(), right?
 26 B: [technical terms ()
 27 then, I come across a non-
 28 understandable (for me) wo-
 29 thing,
 30 [sometimes.
 31 A: [U:::::::::h
 32 B: yes.

In his utterances at lines 4, 6 and 9-11, the interviewer makes Japaneseness and foreignness relevant, by suggesting that learning Japanese and speaking to Japanese people must be difficult for the student, as a foreigner. However, Nishizaka observes that this relevance does not last, as the student answers the question about learning Japanese by stating that he has had to learn “technical words” (lines 22-23) for the work he is doing at a construction company. This, Nishizaka argues, makes irrelevant the category pair ‘Japanese’/‘foreigner’ and makes relevant the pair ‘specialist’/‘lay person’, in which it is the (foreign) student who is more entitled to talk about ‘technical terms’ than is the (Japanese) interviewer (even though the terms in question are Japanese). A similar phenomenon can be witnessed in a further extract, in which the student demonstrates his knowledge of Japanese history; Nishizaka argues that this makes relevant the category pair ‘specialist (in Japanese history)’ / ‘lay person’, in which again the student can lay claim to being the ‘specialist’.

It is difficult to determine whether the student is actively contesting the ‘foreigner’ label being ascribed to him by the interviewer, or whether he is simply answering the question as he sees appropriate. However, those who have conducted research on identity labelling (or ‘ascription’) in the time since this paper was

published (e.g. Day 1998; Fukuda 2006) may interpret this excerpt differently to Nishizaka. He suggests that the category ‘foreigner’ is used, but simply does not become relevant in this part of the interaction. The implication here is that there are no intentions on the part of either interlocutor to ascribe or reject any identity categories on themselves or the other; it is simply a case that the conversation moves in a direction such that the relevance of ‘foreignness’ is replaced by that of ‘specialist’ (in the technical terminology in question).

While there is insufficient evidence within the extract to determine exactly how the interactants themselves understood such identity work (remembering that ethnomethodology follows a strictly emic perspective), it could be argued that there is a power struggle at play here; that the identity of ‘foreigner’ is being contested by the student, or being *made* irrelevant. Although Day’s research (1994; 1998) does not explicitly outline its interest as ‘interculturality’, it certainly has similar themes to that of Nishizaka. In examining interaction amongst workers in multicultural workplaces in Sweden, Day considers the process of making relevant another’s ethnic identity. Further, Day explains how this ethnification can intentionally be contested by the party being labelled. He suggests that the following example – in which Lars, Rita and Xi (who is ethnically Chinese) discuss plans for a work party – illustrates this succinctly:

Excerpt 2

(adapted from Day 1998, p.162. Original in Swedish; again, I include only the English translation)

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | L: don’t we have something that, |
| 2 | one can eat that, China or |

- 3 R: Chinese food is really pretty
4 good
5 X: haha () it doesn't matter, I'll
6 eat anything
7 R: ah (that's [what I that)
8 L: [yeah, but this
9 concerns everyone doesn't it?

In lines 1-4, Lars and Rita raise the possibility of eating Chinese food at the work party. Here again the emic perspective becomes relevant. It is impossible to know for sure whether or not the suggestion of Chinese food is made relevant by Lars and Rita because of Xi's Chinese ethnicity. However, Day argues that Xi must perceive that to be the case, as *she* treats it as such. Further, in stating that she will 'eat anything', which is preceded by laughter (lines 5-6), Xi is denying the relevance of the category which Lars and Rita have ascribed her to.

The implications of these findings and how/if they might apply to different contexts will be considered further in the final sections. But it is now necessary to consider further Nishizaka's work, to outline how 'foreignness' can also be made relevant through the *features* of talk.

3.2 Making 'foreignness' relevant through the features of talk

In outlining the second aim of his research, Nishizaka argues that:

interaction takes a particular form as a consequence of the embodiment in it of an expected relationship between the participants, i.e., a relationship bound to the ownership of the language, and therefore bound to the category pair. 'Japanese'/'foreigner'. (p.315)

That is, there are interactional features (such as overlap, and ‘grasp claims’, both used more extensively by the interlocutor whose first language is being used) which demonstrate the relevance of the interculturality of the interaction. Nishizaka argues that the asymmetrical use of overlap and grasp claims illustrate how the Japanese interviewer is claiming language ownership and, by consequence implying ‘non-ownership’ on the part of the student. This making relevant the ‘native speaker’ (NS) / ‘non-native speaker’ (NNS) nature of the interaction further exemplifies the ‘Japanese’/‘foreigner’ nature of it.

Other studies support this suggestion by similarly examining the nature of NS-NNS interaction using conversation analysis. For example, Kurhila’s (2006) monograph examines in detail institutional interactions between NSs and NNSs of Finnish; she illustrates how repair, other correction and reformulations (for example) are organised in such interactions, suggests that the organisation is different than is typically noted when all parties are using their first language, and argues that the participants are orienting to their perceived asymmetrical linguistic competencies.

However, there is also some controversy among applied linguists regarding the accuracy of the terms NS and NNS (e.g. Firth and Wagner 1997), not to mention the notion of linguistic competence equating to ‘foreignness’. Returning to Nishizaka’s work, I do not wish to comment on his arguments in relation to the Japanese context of which he speaks, but it does seem necessary to point out that this argument would seemingly not hold with regards to interactions conducted in English, whose position as the world’s lingua franca means that ownership claims are controversial and contestable. This is an issue which will be elaborated upon in the discussion section.

3.3 Summary

In a later publication, Nishizaka has argued that the participants in the radio interviews “are, so to speak, ‘doing being a Japanese (or a foreigner)’ and ‘doing cultural differences’ within interactions” (1999, p.237). While his first point is well argued, it is debatable that there is strong evidence of the interlocutors ‘doing cultural differences’.

In this conceptualisation of interculturality, it seems that one party is being defined in terms of the other, i.e. what they are *not*, rather than of what they are. Nishizaka argues that interculturality is being achieved when an interlocutor is being treated as a cultural ‘other’. Fukuda (2006) found similar when examining a mealtime discussion between a Chinese student studying in Japan and a Japanese family. It is noted that the Japanese hosts discursively create categorizations, such as ‘developing nation’ vs. ‘developed nation’, ‘NS’ vs. ‘NNS’, and ‘Japanese cultural novice’ vs. ‘Japanese cultural expert’. This process is described by Fukuda as ‘exoticisation’. The similarities with Nishizaka’s research are clear to see, not least that in both cases, the minority is being created as an ‘other’.

There is another largely influential study of ‘interculturality-in-interaction’, in which it is more apparent that the interactants are orienting to differences between cultures (rather than orienting to ‘foreignness’). However, in now considering this work, it will hopefully become clear that the researcher’s arguments that her participants are ‘doing cultural differences’ are, again, somewhat unconvincing.

4. Interculturality as making national cultural knowledge relevant

Mori (2003) investigated how Japanese and American students initiate and organise topical talk while doing ‘getting to know you’ in an initial encounter. The main focus being on sequential development and participation structure, which at times “reflect the social identities defined by the participants’ affiliations with different cultures” (p.149).

Mori’s research is heavily influenced by Maynard and Zimmerman’s (1984) work on unacquainted pairs, in which they observed that pairs who do not share a previous history of interaction will often engage in topical talk through questions and answers in order to determine common territories.

The researcher deliberately chose a setting in which two ‘national teams’ of students are doing ‘getting to know each other’, in order to see how each team would use cultural products of their respective nations as a means of finding common ground. This, Mori argues, is making cultural differences relevant (and then later irrelevant).

4.1 Making interculturality relevant

The questions asked by Mori’s participants concern visiting one another’s countries, and experiences and opinions of food and movies from those countries. Mori argues that by asking such questions, the participants are attempting to discover shared experiences and/or knowledge across cultural boundaries, which may lead to effectively extend topical talk. Further, she believes that the very:

nominations of topics concerning things Japanese or things American, and the allocations of the turns that are evoked by these topics, make visible the participants’ orientation to the interculturality of the interaction. (p.152)

For example, when asking “have you seen any Japanese movies?”, by specifically referring to Japan, the Japanese student is (1) evoking the division between the Japanese and non-Japanese interactants and (2) implicitly directing the question at those non-Japanese interactants. It is taken for granted that the Japanese interactants will have seen some movies from their home country. So it is the alignment of participants as possible respondents when asking questions about cultural items which demonstrates that this interaction is being treated as an intercultural one.

Mori also suggests that the organization of participation in discussions once topics have been established demonstrates further the intercultural nature of the interaction. More specifically, the formation of teams in order to seek help for misunderstandings or knowledge gaps are further instances in which interculturality is being made relevant by the interactants:

By addressing a request for assistance to a particular coparticipant, the participant who has encountered a problem treats the coparticipant as someone who shares the knowledge and resources for solving the problem. Such an assumption demonstrated through verbal and nonverbal conduct also reveals how the participants tend to make visible the relevance of interculturality at particular moments in interactions. (p.161)

For example, in discussing American food items, Toru (one of the Japanese students) finds himself as the only one of the four interactants not to know what oatmeal is. Mori argues that, in selecting his fellow Japanese for assistance, rather than one of the American students (who he may presume would have the most ‘authentic’ knowledge of oatmeal), Toru is demonstrating that it is the assumption of a shared knowledge base and shared experiences which are more critical in the prompt reaching of understanding.

Unlike in the data presented by Nishizaka and Fukuda, there is little evidence of ‘foreignerising’ in Mori’s data. This may well be due to context, since this interaction is between university peers who are attempting to get acquainted, i.e. find common ground. However, like Nishizaka, Mori argues that there is evidence of the participants treating interculturality as irrelevant in her data.

4.2 Treating interculturality as irrelevant

Mori also shows how there are times in the interaction between the Japanese and American students when the formation of ‘cultural teams’ is rejected, when members of the other group interject to offer assistance when group members cannot assist one another. Mori argues that this is an example of making interculturality irrelevant.

Mori suggests that once a cultural item is recognised by all parties, then this discovery of shared knowledge and experience across cultural boundaries can serve to facilitate topical talk which deconstructs the formation of cultural teams.

Much of the arguments Mori put forward are reflected in a recent study by Zimmerman (2007), in which she uses MCA to examine claims to cultural expertise about cultural items and practices made among Korean and Japanese participants in Japan. The Koreans in question are described as advanced users of the Japanese language, appear to have been living in Japan for some time, and are obviously very familiar with national cultural practices and items.

Zimmerman argues that her research challenges many assumptions about intercultural conversation, by showing (1) interculturality is not always made relevant by interlocutors who do not share the same home country or first language, (2) that

cultural expertise can be demonstrated by ‘non-members’ of that culture and (3) that presumed cultural experts do not always enact their cultural memberships. Zimmerman’s first point reflects that made by Mori, but second and third points take Mori’s arguments further, and are worth briefly considering.

In a discussion on the differences and similarities of certain Japanese and Korean food items, the Japanese participants often enact the identity of Korean cultural expert. Zimmerman suggests that here the participants are enacting ethnic/national identities which do not align with their *prima facie* ethnicity/nationality. This argument is weak; while the Japanese participants are displaying an identity as a ‘knowledge-bearer of Korean cultural practices’, there is little evidence that they are doing ‘being Korean’, which would obviously be quite different. Zimmerman proposes “that interculturality is dependent upon the orientation to, or lack of orientation to, the identity of ‘cultural expert’” (p.91), but surely cultural *expert* does not necessitate cultural *member* (whatever that may be or entail).

Similarly, Zimmerman also believes that the most interesting finding in her study is that, in aligning with negative assessments about their own cultures, they are creating ambiguous cultural identities. Again, this argument is debatable at least. Although Zimmerman does not consider it in much detail, her data suggests that the interpersonal and institutional relationships may affect participants’ abilities to claim cultural expertise, or at least to challenge negative assessments of their own culture. However, it could also be that members of a culture simply agree with negative assessments of that culture; surely one does not have to hold a positive view of a culture in order to consider oneself a member of it.

4.3 Summary

Zimmerman's paper illustrates the difficulty in operationalising interculturality as the possession of knowledge of one's national cultural items and practices. Similarly, Mori claims that her study "explicates how the participants utilize their cultural differences as a resource for organizing their participation" (p.143-144). However, there is possibly some confusion here with regards to what 'cultural differences' (which implies difference between the nation members which are based upon their respective cultures) are. It seems apparent that the participants are simply checking one another's knowledge of cultural items; in doing so, they are seeking common ground, while doing 'getting to know you'. As Mori shows, once this common ground has been established, it is difficult to see interculturality being treated as relevant.

In the closing sections, some issues addressed so far will be discussed. Included will be a consideration of the context which my PhD research will examine – multinational interactions conducted in the world language of English.

5. Discussion

In examining the research which has applied conversation analysis to the study of interculturality, two main ways of operationalising interculturality have been identified: (1) as the making relevant the 'foreignness' of one or more of the interactants and (2) the making relevant the differences in national cultural items and practices. It has been argued that there are some potential problems and pitfalls in operationalising culture in these ways, as have been demonstrated in some of the research.

It also seems largely apparent that context plays a large role in the studies examined. In this section, it seems appropriate to briefly consider how these operationalisations might be even more problematic in the context of multinational English language interactions.

Nishizaka argues that his data demonstrates the interlocutors' relationship as a one "bound to the ownership of the language, and therefore bound to the category pair, 'Japanese'/'foreigner'" (1995, p.315). Similarly, Kurhila (2006) has considered how the features of interactions conducted in Finnish differ when one party is using the language as an L2. However, Mori has argued against this, stating that her data does not support Nishizaka's arguments (2003). This is not the place to discuss issues of NS and NNS status with regards to these particular contexts, but it should be pointed out that notions of language ownership, while controversial here, are even more so when applied to English language interactions.

It is impossible to suggest who would have rights to claim ownership of English in an interaction between two parties who are using it as an additional language, or between two parties who use it as a first language, albeit very differently. Firth (2007) has shown how ownership between L2 users of English can be contestable and contested; when this is the case, when there appears to be no linguistic minority, it is surely not possible to argue that ownership of a language is bound to a category pair of 'native'/'foreigner'.

Similarly, in Nishizaka's work, as with the study by Fukuda and Day, national/ethnic minority status appears to be fairly easy to ascribe. In the former, the non-native student is being interviewed on a radio station whose focus is on the experiences of foreign students. In Fukuda's research, it is again a foreign student

being quizzed about foreigner problems by a native host. While in Day's work, a Chinese worker is interacting with Swedish workers in a Swedish workplace. In all of these contexts, minority status is somewhat clearer than in a multinational context, where no (or all) interactants may be in the contextual minority. This would seemingly be especially true if such multinational interactions were occurring online, which could serve as a kind of national and ethnic 'neutral territory'.

To my knowledge, no research has been conducted which has examined 'foreignerising' or 'otherising' amongst parties in which there is no clear minority party. In such circumstances, it would be difficult to suppose how or why such processes would occur. Would this mean that interculturality would not be made relevant? Following Nishizaka's operationalisation, perhaps not.

Finally, with regards to the consideration of interculturality put forward by Mori (2003) and, later, Zimmerman (2007), there appear to be problems in understanding the discussion of national cultural items and practices as making interculturality relevant. Were the parties from different parts of the same nation, and discussing food items from their respective home towns, could this be considered as making interculturality relevant? If we are to avoid considering culture as purely national, then surely it must be. The problem then lies in determining what is *not* intercultural – two parties discussing similarities in their different professions, families discussing their habits within their homes, students discussing their respective university's protocols – everything can be considered as the making relevant differences in cultural practices or items.

As addressed briefly earlier, Zimmerman's work appears to further exemplify the potential pitfalls in analysing cultural identities. When her participants enact an

identity of ‘Korean cultural expert’, are they “challenging essential notions of ethnic/national identity that presumes a perfect correlation between cultural identity and race or nationality”, as she suggests (2007, p.76)? It seems here that the implication is that to demonstrate knowledge of cultural practices is to enact cultural membership; this is surely not so. However, if that is accepted to be the case, it raises further complications in operationalising interculturality. If, in an English language interaction among multinational participants, a Japanese national enacts a ‘Korean cultural expert’ identity when discussing Korean practices with a Japanese interlocutor, could that be considered intercultural? Or could it if an American and a Thai discuss French food? Or if two Americans discuss Thai food? Once again, many interactions will then be considered intercultural.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, I have attempted to problematise the operationalisations of interculturality as have been applied in studies on the subject which adopt a CA methodology. Further, I have argued that such operationalisations may well prove even more problematic when applied to the complex interactional context of multinational ELF conversations.

One of the key tenets behind CA research is the emic perspective, which allows the participants to demonstrate for themselves what is relevant, and how. It seems necessary then to explore multinational interactions and to carefully explicate if (and how) the interactants involved are orienting to any form of interculturality, be it through making foreignness relevant, through making national cultural practices relevant, or through some other means. It is possible that such research will uncover a

new operationalisation of interculturality. It is similarly possible that such research will add further weight to the argument that interculturality is too slippery, and incomplete, a concept to ever convincingly demonstrate.

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Transcription conventions

[A square bracket indicates the onset of overlapping speech.
=	An equal sign indicates 'latching' by a speaker, i.e. the beginning of an utterance immediately following their interlocutor's utterance, without any gap.
Stre::::tch	Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound. More colons indicate a longer sound stretch.
(guess)	A word inside brackets indicates a transcriber's best guess to identify an unclear utterance.
()	Empty brackets indicate a sound or word which can not be identified by the transcriber.

N.B. please note that traditional CA uses of (for example) commas and full stops do not apply in the cases of the excerpts used in this article. This is at the discretion of the researchers who originally published them. Transcripts have not been altered from those originally published, although aspects (such as original language) have been omitted.

About the author

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