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The ecology of intercultural interaction: timescales, temporal ranges and identity dynamics



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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the ecolinguistic research agenda in two ways: first, it introduces a distinct ecological approach to intricacies of intercultural interaction, emphasizing the multiple voices, subjectivities and historicities that meet and mesh in such encounters. Second, it introduces an ecological model of timescales that allows ecological language scientists to adopt a naturalized position in order to show how temporal patterns crisscross complex empirical data; the key word is that of *temporal ranges*, i.e. ranges of timescales constrained by the same organizing principle. Using this model, we describe a principled method for extracting temporal patterns, historicities and sociocultural voices in complex empirical data. Our example is “another” Thanksgiving dinner (cf. Tannen, 1984) where a German, a Russian and two Japanese women interact in a US context. Our analysis shows how past events (e.g. the spread of the Ottoman Empire, Germany and Japan during World War II, Russian–American relations during the cold war, and the election of cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as pope in 2005) become powerful constraints on the interactional dynamics between the interlocutors, as they use these events to project and mold their dialogical and social identities, vis-à-vis each other and the researcher. At the end of the article, we present an ecological view on identity, and we discuss the role of the researcher in an ecological paradigm.

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1. Introduction

Homo sapiens sapiens is a thoroughly encultured species. From birth, even from conception, culture constrains and conditions our human forms of life. As culture shapes our bodies and our relationships, it immerses us and our children into specific cultural habits of being and languaging with one another. From an ecolinguistic point of view, it therefore becomes an urgent research question to ask how culture conditions our ecological existence: what do cultures do to us, to our relationships, and to the world that we inhabit? What happens to us, as we enter the Heideggerian house of language, while language simultaneously leaks into our biological being?

This article contributes to the ecolinguistic agenda by exploring how culture conditions human co-existence. We approach the cultural complexities of the human existence by adopting as our object the even more complex phenomenon of intercultural interaction. Our rationale behind adopting intercultural interaction as our object in an ecological context is that it requires human beings to interrelate via different cultural constraints. With Edgar Morin (1987: 28), we can say that the intercultural interaction has its particular *dia-logics*, i.e. it creates a unity, not through merging or assimilation,

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but through the interplay of complementary, competitive, and antagonistic cultural logics. An ecological approach to intercultural interaction thus contrasts with the usual view that attributes difficulties in intercultural interaction to a lack of a common language and common cultural assumptions among the interlocutors. In the latter view, it is believed that intercultural understanding can be fostered by more information about and greater tolerance towards the cultural Other, by a willingness and an ability to see the world and oneself from the other's perspective, and, in general, by a willingness to interact and enter into dialog with speakers from different cultures (Byram, 1997; Hu and Byram, 2009). Some scholars like Willis Edmondson and Juliane House have argued that the concept of “intercultural learning” is superfluous, because communicative competence already covers the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning necessary to bring about understanding across cultures (Edmondson and House, 1998). Both communicative competence and intercultural learning are predicated on a modernist notion of speech and culture. In a modernist view, people say what they mean and mean what they say, their speech refers to a stable world of objective truths, these truths can be negotiated through rational argument and information exchange and people get to accept and respect each other on the basis of that information.

However, the rapid globalization of the economy, the spread of global information technologies, and the increase in human migration have catapulted intercultural interaction out of modernity. It has entered a late modern phase, where people speak the same language but mean different things, indeed it is not always clear they really mean what they say: the words they speak are not necessarily theirs, and the memories these words evoke are not necessarily shared. In this late modern world, it has become more difficult to distinguish what is specifically one's own and what is the foreign culture. Through the internet and mass media, people's cultures, histories, memories, aspirations are now imbricated in one another. While inherently embedded in ecological reality, utterances, actions, and events acquire their meaning in non-linear, historically and culturally contingent ways that depend on the particular beings' point of views and subject positions in time and space.

On this basis, an ecological approach rejects modernist and structuralist theories of intercultural interaction, as they are unable to capture the cultural, societal and emotional complexity of cross-cultural encounters. Rather, we have to draw on more ecological theories, just as we need to develop a more complex practice of engaging with interculturally constrained processes and activities. On the backdrop of post-structuralist discourse approach, as advocated by Blommaert (2005), this article takes a step towards a conception of intercultural interaction that draws on dynamical and complexity theory (e.g. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; Hodges and Fowler, 2010, 2011), on ecological linguistics (e.g. Fill and Mühlhäuser, 2001; Steffensen and Fill, 2013; Kramsch, 2002, 2007; Kramsch and Whiteside, 2008; Kramsch and Steffensen, 2008), and on distributed approaches to language (Cowley, 2007, 2009, 2011a; Cowley et al., 2010; Hodges et al., 2012).

Significantly, these approaches discard the modernist illusion of language being a cultural vehicle for representational meaning. They deny the existence of a ‘language system’ that can be ‘used’ by the ‘language user’, and they reject the “code-view on language” (Harris, 1998; Love, 2004), i.e. the view that language functions through processes of encoding and decoding meaning into and from wording. Rather, an ecological–dynamical approach takes a starting point in the dynamics of human existence. Hence, utterance-activity (Cowley, 1998) rises from our bodily experiences and emotions, our actions, activities and interpersonal relations. With Love (1990) and Thibault (2011), we can refer to the lived activity as *first-order languaging*, i.e. “whole-body sense-making activity that enables persons to engage with each other in forms of coaction and to integrate themselves with and to take part in social activities that may be performed either solo or together with other agents” (Thibault, 2011: 215). In contrast, “what most people, including linguists, think of as language” (Thibault, 2011: 216) is *second-order language*, i.e. “stabilized cultural patterns on longer, slower cultural timescales” (Thibault, 2011: 216). These lexicogrammatical patterns function as attractors for our first-order languaging, and they are hence “integrated with the first-order dynamics in ways that facilitate coordination between persons and between persons and aspects of their worlds and interpretation” (Thibault, 2011: 232). An ecological approach, accordingly, seeks to understand language and sense-making in a wider context of human co-existence.

This article draws on a study conducted by Michiko Uryu, who studied the practices of an American non-profit organization founded 50 years ago to foster “cultural and social exchange” among female international visitors at American universities (Uryu, 2009). Our analysis exploits the fact that (intercultural) interaction takes place in complex, dynamical systems which Steffensen (2012) refers to as *dialogical systems*. Dialogical systems share properties with other dynamical systems, and we exploit this fact by adopting a complexity theoretical focus on the *timescales* involved in intercultural interaction. The theoretical underpinnings of this approach will be outlined in Section 2. Section 3 opens with a presentation of object and method, before it turns to our analysis of (some of) the complexities of an instance of intercultural interaction. Finally, we sketch how our complexity-based, ecological approach gives rise to a post-constructivist conception of intercultural and interactional identity, of as well participants (Section 4) as researchers (Section 5).

2. The temporal dynamics of ecological and dialogical systems

In the tradition of Conversation Analysis, analysts attempt to analyze data from “the participants' perspective, from which the individuals involved in social action interpret what is happening moment by moment in their interaction” (Liddicoat, 2011: 73). From an ecological point of view, such an approach may achieve *descriptive adequacy*, e.g. by establishing that a participant in a conversation orients to another participant's utterance as a violation of social norms. But the approach does not achieve *explanatory adequacy* in that it cannot tell us *why* that particular social norm has emerged, nor why that particular utterance counts as a violation of social normativity.

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