Communication, Contexts and Culture

A communicative constructivist approach to intercultural communication

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1. Culture and the ‘communicative paradigm’

The analysis of the problem of intercultural communication depends on the clarification of the relationship between communication and culture. Is communication only one subordinate element of culture, and, if so, is intercultural communication only one of many paths between cultures? Is culture to be considered as one sub-system of the communication system, and intercultural communication as something similar to an interpenetration between systems? Or is culture at the very bottom of society, so that real intercultural communication falls prey to cultural relativism and becomes virtually impossible?

The relationship between culture and communication may appear obvious, if not trivial, to those influenced by the ideas of postmodernism, poststructuralism or cultural studies. However, even contemporary theoreticians like Richard Rorty still refer to culture in terms of science, philosophy or the arts. This traditional notion of culture has been defined by Scheler (1960: 31f; 60ff) as the “higher forms of knowledge”, i.e. the bourgeois notion of “representative culture” (Tenbruck 1990) which pursued the bourgeois ideals of ‘Bildung’. This elitist notion of culture had previously been attacked by Vico and ‘romantic’ thinkers such as Herder and the Grimms. In sociology, the discovery of culture beyond the ‘higher forms of knowledge’ goes back to authors such as Simmel who considered prostitution, fashion, or dining as cultural phenomena. With the “discovery” of everyday life, sociology came to
stress culture as something linked to meaningful or symbolic action. Yet the shift towards communication would not have been possible without the strong impact of Saussurian linguistics on anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), which came to consider culture in terms of the linguistic structure of “language”. Before Lévi-Strauss, culture was understood as a system of meaning to be learned by its members; afterwards it was understood to be a system of signs.

This “pansemiotic” concept of culture has been criticised by another language-based research trend. As a consequence of “linguistic turn” theory, inspired by authors such as Wittgenstein and Austin, it has been argued that signs cannot be considered in isolation from the actions by which they are produced. Rather than focusing on sign systems (or postmodem dissolution, bricolage or parody of these systems), anthropologists came to stress that culture was to be found in “parole”, the spoken language (Hymes and Gumperz 1964). This approach to culture follows what has been termed by Habermas (1988) the “communicative paradigm” (Habermas 1988). This paradigm is characterised by the idea that culture is being constructed in communicative actions. Although in English the notion of communication may be mistakenly understood to refer to a cybernetic model of information transmission, communicative action is meant here to include the performance of social action in the use of language as well as nonverbal signs, cultural objects and artefacts; the theory thus makes reference to the theories of social action developed by Max Weber and Alfred Schütz. Although programmatically proposing a theory of communicative action, I shall show that Habermas himself does not manage to avoid the structuralist notion of sign systems independent of social action. This has been much more successfully achieved by empirical approaches within the social sciences such as “conversation analysis”, “ethnography of communication” and “interpretive sociolinguistics”, which show that “language in use” is one of the principal architects of this construction process. However, hardly any theoretical attempts have been made to recognise the contribution of these empirical approaches to the theory of communicative action and culture.1

Evaluating the theoretical consequences of such a diverse set of empirical approaches is a complex task. However, since all these approaches, as well as Habermas’ theory of communicative action, are based on the theory of social action of Max Weber, Alfred Schütz and other proponents of “interpretive sociology” or “Verstehende Soziologie”, I will take them as my common denominator and starting point. Within this framework I want to stress the unique contribution of Alfred Schütz. Schütz is widely considered to be a theoretician of the “life-world” who clarified Weber’s notion of the subjective meaning of social action is guided, oriented to and coordinated. Yet the fact that Schütz not only mentioned the role of communicative action but also asserted that the life-world is a thoroughly “communicative environment” has been hitherto ignored. Since he takes the socio-cultural world as being made up of communicative actions, it is reasonable to take this theory as a basis for a notion of communicative culture.

On this basis, I intend to develop a notion of communicative action which can provide a general framework for analysing intercultural communication. Communicative action will be shown to construct contexts which are reflexively generated by the very communicative actions which are performed in this context. This reflexive process will be referred to as “contextualisation”. At an analytic level, one can distinguish three different analytical aspects of communicative actions referring to the different ways in which contextualisation is achieved. Culture can thus be considered as the construction of contexts by means of communicative action. In order to clarify this notion of communicative action, I shall first contrast it with Habermas’ theory of communicative action as well as with systems theory’s notion of communication (Section 2). Communicative action is characterised by reflexivity, a feature which is also emphasised in conversation analysis and interpretive sociolinguistics. Using the notion of reflexivity adopted by these approaches, it will be shown (Section 3) that it is reflexivity which relates communicative actions to their contexts. The three aspects of contextualisation will then be outlined in relation to the analytical features of communicative action (Section 4). These contexts constitute what may be called communicative culture, a notion which may be pertinent to the study of intercultural communication (Section 5).

2. Language, social and communicative action

The notion of communicative action was brought to the forefront of sociological discourse by Habermas’ (1981) well-known theory of communicative action. Yet, despite the importance of Habermas’ programmatic claim, his theory fails to solve the problem. There are two reasons for this:

A. For Habermas (1981: 114f), communicative action is characterised by the rationality of language; rationality is, so to speak, imparted in language since language allows for the distinction of different validity claims
communicative action allows for rational understanding. Habermas concedes that everyday communication is "unerradically rhetorical"; yet the very fact that speakers, even if they disagree, go on talking to one another demonstrates their "contrafactual" orientation towards the possibility of rational understanding and coming to an agreement. By making this distinction between two types of action he builds up two distinct ontological spheres. Teleological action and its "functional rationality" give rise to systems, whereas communicative action pertains to the 'socio-cultural life world'. Although this distinction allows the 'systemic colonisation of the life-world' to be revealed, it establishes an opposition between 'two worlds'.

Not only is it difficult to explain how these two worlds are held together but the separation is not even accepted by systems theory. Systems theory (or the theory of autopoeic systems) holds that communication is an all-penetrating phenomenon (Luhmann 1984). To systems theory, everything social is not only functional, but also communicative. Whereas systems theory proposes far too general and indistinct a notion of communication, phenomenologically orientated sociology provides an alternative theory of communicative action which explains how the context of communicative action is constructed by and provides meaning for these very actions.

Starting from Weber's notion of action as any meaningful behaviour, phenomenologically orientated sociology tries to clarify the subjective content of meaning that guides action. As Schütz argues, action is any meaningful experience which is orientated towards and anticipates ("modo futuri exacti") a future state of affairs. Thus, thinking about a problem may have just as much a right to be called an action as jumping into cold water (in order to save someone). Since communicative action is intrinsically orientated towards someone else, it is almost by definition a form of social action. But it is a special form of social action since it is not only orientated to another agent but also involves reciprocal orientation: in principle, it is orientated to some kind of "reply". This reply may only be a form of thinking: "I want the other person to know that there is "x""; but it may also be another act of working or another communicative action: "I want the other person to do "y"", or "I want the other person to answer my question".

Like Habermas, Schütz and Luckmann thus presuppose some kind of orientation towards understanding. However, whereas Habermas assumes language to provide for understanding, Schütz considers the basic intersubjective principle of reciprocity to lie at the heart of common understanding.
Reciprocity is not to be understood as “equality” of communicating partners, contrafactually assumed in the very act of communication. Reciprocity, rather, applies to any form of social interaction, as for example a conflict of interest or even a fight between unequals. It applies to acts of consciousness and their bodily counterparts such as the principle of the interchangeability of standpoints which is presupposed even in as simple an action as shaking hands, and the principle of reciprocity of motives which underlies intersubjective sequences of action (Schütz 1962: 12).

This problem of intersubjectivity is at the heart of Schütz’ thinking: how do we deal with the fact that we have no direct access to another person’s intention? How do we deal with the ‘transcendence’ of another person’s mind? Although we never conclusively solve this problem, we attempt to do so via communicative action, i.e. we indicate what we mean by way of some form of “objectivation”, “expression” or “sign”. These objectivations are products of action (to be more exact, “acts of working”), yet at the same time they are intended to signify our intentions. Communicative action thus involves different processes, such as intersubjectivity mirroring, reciprocity, and taking the role of the other, yet it also requires a kind of “objectivation”, of producing an object by which the other’s intentions are “apparated”.

Schütz distinguishes several kinds of objectivation. Objectivations can be found at the elementary level of spatial and time references, such as indications and marks. References to subjective intentions are signs in the narrower sense, which are typically part of a more comprehensive sign system. The most important sign system is, of course, language since it provides actors with what Schütz calls “a store-house of pre-constituted types” of experience and action. Finally, signs which refer to a reality other than the reality of everyday life in which we communicate are called symbols; symbols may be found in the formalised language of mathematics, in the metaphorical language of poetry, or in the icons of religion.

Yet signs and other objectivations are not to be viewed in isolation from action. First, the referential meaning of signs is constituted in interaction. Moreover, signs are produced by the communicative action itself as products of an ‘objectivation’ in the common environment. Third, these objectivations are produced with the intention of transmitting some meaning. Since the understanding of this meaning is anticipated and, in the course of the production of meaning, indicated and ‘mirrored’ by the other’s expression, action or response, objectivations function as “co-ordination devices” for the interactants.

By means of objectivations actors can, so to speak, gear (i.e. coordinate) their actions into one another by retrospectively and prospectively interpreting (i.e. ‘synchronising’) their corresponding motives. This synchronisation of action-projects and the co-ordination of courses of action is shown in Schütz’s analysis of the question-answer sequence:

I ask you a question. The in-order-to motive of my act is not only the expectation that you will understand my question, but also to get your answer; or more precisely, I reckon that you will answer, but am undecided as to what the content of your answer may be. (...) The question, we may say, is the because-motive of the answer, as the answer is the in-order-to motive of the question. (...) I myself have felt on innumerable occasions induced to react to another’s act, which I had interpreted as a question addressed to me, with a kind of behaviour of which the in-order-to motive was my expectation that the other, the questioner, might interpret my behaviour as an answer. (Schütz 1964a: 14)

This example not only demonstrates how the synchronisation of motives (i.e. subjective intentions) and the co-ordination of the courses of conduct are interlocked. It also hints at a further, more important feature of communicative actions which in systems theory has been called the “problem of double contingency”: communicative actions which are projected as questions may never be answered; what was intended to be co-ordinated may fail in the course of the interaction. To put it another way, whatever actors may intend, they only know what they are doing as a result of corresponding acts of their co-actors. With respect to successful communicative action, this problem can also be reformulated as reflexivity of communicative acts: the answer is not only an answer, it also shows that the question has been understood as it had been intended to be understood. Although ‘perfect understanding’ is never achieved, reflexivity enables communicative action to achieve common understanding” by both acting and indicating understanding of the act (mirrored by objectivation within the common environment of the actors and by reciprocal orientation towards each other).

3. Reflexivity, contextualization and context

Reflexivity of communicative action can be regarded as one of the subject matters of empirical research in conversation analysis. Conversation analysis (CA) started by analysing the mechanisms of communicative interaction,
especially with respect to the organisation of turn taking in conversations. Like other approaches, it takes a decidedly empirical approach to natural communication, i.e. communication in non-experimental settings, and use of (audio and visual) tape recordings of communicative objectivations in these settings. Although CA prefers the notion of “conversation” or “talk in interaction” it not only refers to the exchange of utterances, but also to interpretation. It is assumed that communicative actions are not only observable and interpret-able by the scientific observer but that interpretation of utterances is the problem for the interactants themselves. This phenomenon is labelled “reflexivity” by CA. Reflexivity means that in the course of their actions, participants indicate the meaning of their actions and their understanding of prior actions. The ways in which the utterances are produced constitute the methods by which these utterances are made observable, understandable and accountable. This notion of reflexivity is strongly reminiscent of Schütz’s description of reciprocity. His above description of question-answer sequences echoes an account by Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson (1974: 44): 6

When a speaker addresses a first pair-part, such as a ‘question’, or a ‘complaint’ to another, we have noted, he selects the other as next speaker, and selects for him that he do a second part of the ‘adjacency pair’ he has started, that is, to do an ‘answer’. (...) The addressee, in doing the second pair-part, such as an ‘answer’ or an ‘apology’, not only does that utterance-type, but thereby displays (in the first place to his coparticipants) his understanding of the prior turn’s talk as a first pair, as a ‘question’ or a ‘complaint’.  

Moreover, CA analysis opts for a strong notion of reflexivity,

for it is a systematic consequence of the turn-taking organization of conversation that it obliges its participants to display to each other, in a turn’s talk, their understanding of other turns’ talk. (...) Regularly, then, a turn’s talk will display its speaker’s understanding of a prior turn’s talk... (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson 1974: 44).

Thus, in speech, speakers not only interlock their motives and co-ordinate their actions, they also demonstrate what kind of actions they are performing. This shaping of certain actions is brought about by the methods speakers use. By following these methods, speakers achieve a specific orderliness in their utterances.

This notion of reflexivity may be termed “strong” since conversation analysis assumes that the orderliness of utterances, their “systematicity”, is produced locally, i.e. by the very utterances which then form part of the order.

On this view, the order of conversation is, like any social order, an accomplishment of the actors in the situation in which their actions are performed. The social facts construed by these actions are exclusively the consequence of this situative, local production:

Not only is the allocation of turns accomplished in each turn for a next, but the determination of turn size is locally accomplished, that is, accomplished in the developmental course of each turn, under constraints imposed by a next turn and an orientation to a next turn in the current one (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson 1974: 41).

As a consequence, turns at talk construct the very context of which they are a part: on the one hand, utterances are “context-shaped”, i.e. they are embedded in a sequence of actions in such a way that the sequence guides their production and interpretation; on the other hand, they are also context renewing, since they themselves contribute to and constitute a part of this context (Drew and Heritage 1992: 18f). Context is thus characterised by its distinctive dependence on the local production of turn, by its situatedness. Because conversation analysis stresses the local character of situated actions, it analyses the features of observable communicative interaction in a very detailed way. CA is thus able to demonstrate the fine-grained reflexive interlocking of talk.

However, CA has been criticised for two reasons which have been most clearly formulated by Goffman (1981: 32ff): How can CA account for those elements which are not observable in momentary interaction (a problem especially pertinent for those conversation analysts who restrict themselves to the audio channel)? And how can CA account for those elements of the situation which lie beyond the few communicative turns under investigation? Thus, in stressing the local character of actions, Goffman argues that CA ignores the broader social context in which they occur. This argument is stressed even more by Bourdieu (1982) who criticises CA for its ‘pointillist hyper-empiricism’. In his view, CA falls prey to a radical situationalism which takes actors to construct social reality anew in every moment without being able to rely on rituals, conventions and institutions.

Both these problems are addressed by an approach which is based on the “ethnography of communication”. Inspired by Gumperz and Hymes in the early 1960s, the ethnography of communication tried to describe the features of the situation in which language is used, i.e. the “speech event”. This speech event was analysed in terms of several components, such as “setting”, “partici-
pants”, “norms of interaction” etc. (Hymes 1962). However, as with conventional sociolinguistics, Hymes restricted context to a set of factors which could be determined independently of the ongoing speech event. A more reflexive notion of context was only introduced later by Gumperz’s *interpretive sociolinguistics* approach. Unlike the ethnography of communication, this approach considers interaction to be the crucial feature of communication. According to Gumperz (1981: 2), it is only by way of interactive communication that meaning and significance is bestowed upon utterances. Through its central notion of contextualization it can claim to have developed a “reflexive notion of context” (Auer 1992: 21f).

Contextualization means that in communicating, speakers and listeners use verbal and non-verbal signs to indicate what they are doing: arguing, debating, informing etc. These “contextualization cues” are not universal but depend on local contexts. It is the specificity of certain contextualization cues that makes up specific contexts. Thus, membership of a particular speech community is constructed by the use of certain cues which are to be understood as indexical for this community (ranging from certain prosodies, to lexical, stylistical and rhetorical features) (Di Luzio/ Auer 1992).

Yet context is not restricted to large-scale social categories, such as speech communities or networks; it also encompasses situations and communicative forms (cf. Luckmann and Güntner, this volume): competence in a job interview, sales talk or managerial meeting also presupposes certain contextualization cues with respect to the situated code and style used, the structuring of arguments and information, the sequencing of turns etc. Contextualization cues are not “variables”; one should rather say that situational context is constituted by the use of these cues. For example, sales talk between immigrant British Indians is contextualized differently from sales talk between British English people, and this difference is brought about by the communicative actions through which the specific context (i.e. sales talk) is constructed (cf. Gumperz, this volume). Thus, context can neither be defined with respect to some basic universal apparatus nor by variables external to the communicative acts. Rather, context is a feature which characterises the communicative actions; typical contextualization cues are conventions within certain communities of practice by which typical contexts are constructed. In order to be a competent member of a culture one has to know and be able to perform (and negotiate) this contextualization. Culture thus consists of the “shared typifications that enter into the signalling and use of activity types in interaction, as well as systems of contextualization conventions” (Gumperz 1992: 51).

Gumperz evades the situationalism of conversation analysis by stressing the importance of social conventionalised cues for communication and their relation to larger communities. Moreover, Gumperz mainly focuses his empirical analysis on intercultural communication, stressing the close links between contextualisation cues, i.e. communicative conventions, and culture. As a linguist, Gumperz is also, of course, interested in the linguistic and paralinguistic features of these cues. However, the sociological question of how contextualisation relates to social action, social situations and larger collectivities still remains open.

4. Context and the three horizons of contextualisation

Since Malinowski’s seminal essay on the significance of context for the understanding of language (1923), the notion of context has only recently been rediscovered. Current anthropological linguistics, however, still regards context as something to be distinguished from communication. Thus Hanks (1989: 96), for example, draws a distinction between “text” and the extratextual context which constitutes the “broader environment (linguistic, social, psychological) to which text responds and on which it operates”. Goodwin and Duranti (1992: 4ff) also stick to a definition of context in terms of “settings” and “extratextual context” which are distinct from communication, and they leave the question of how the relation between communication and context is to be established open.

Whereas these anthropological approaches tend to maintain the distinction between communicative actions on the one hand and a different kind of context on the other, CA is concerned with the identification of the context as something speakers orient to in their actions. In orientating to their actions, certain “features of the context” are made “relevant” (Schegloff 1992).

The idea of context, therefore, is not simply concerned with a frame within which an action or activity occurs, but rather an analysis seeks to specify, and provide evidence for, the relevance of features of context which inform the very accomplishment of the participants’ conduct. (Heath and Luff 1992: 312)

To CA, different contexts can be considered as “contingent ‘transformations’, “adaptations” of casual conversation”, “derivations” or “variants” of the basic turn-taking model of conversation (Corsaro 1985: 170; Zimmerman and
Boden 1991: 15–17), i.e. of the “primary and prototypical form of language use” (Heritage 1985: 7). In analysing talk in different organisational settings (informal communication, legal settings, therapy sessions, sales talk etc.), in longer stretches of talk, and by comparing conversations in Western culture to those in other cultures (Moerman 1988), CA attempts to show how the respective contexts are produced by specific features of talk (lexical choice, turn design, sequence organisation etc.). CA thus succeeds in identifying a multiplicity of contexts which vary according to the organisation being studied. The features of ‘talk in interaction’ also exhibit peculiarities with respect to virtually any setting under investigation.

However, faced with such a variety of different organisations of talk with respect to social settings, one has to ask: can we find some order in these varying contexts? Are contexts just ephemeral, contingent features of situative communicative actions, or are they organised according to some overarching principle?

The answer I would like to propose is as follows: First, in arguing that context is being constructed in the very communicative actions which then form part of the contexts, one can conclude that the contexts of communicative actions are produced by the actions themselves. It is by way of their reflexivity that communicative actions produce their context. Second, actors’ consciousness serves to link communicative actions to the contexts produced by them over time. This explains the role of cognition and the stress we lay on the fact that communication is performed by actors. Third, since we assume that the general organisation of contexts depends on the type of communicative action performed, we can distinguish different levels of contexts depending on the type of communicative action.

In order to do so, we may find it helpful to turn to Schütz’ theory of social action and social “transcendences”. Although Schütz himself did not himself develop a theory of communicative action, I suggest that a notion of contextualisation by communicative action can be developed by drawing on three elements of his theory:

a. Action: In his theory of action, Schütz distinguishes “direct immediate social action”, which is oriented towards a copresent participant, from mediated action, which extends action into a “secondary manipulatory sphere” that is out of reach.

b. Transcendence: In a (widely ignored) categorical distinction, he divides the spheres of the social world into three levels, referring to different kinds of transcendence to be dealt with by interactants.

c. Objectivation: The various forms of objectivisation (see above) correspond to textual distinctions.

Let us now take these three theoretical elements (action, transcendence and objectivation) as a starting point for distinguishing three horizons of contextualisation:

1. the immediate we-relation of actual ongoing face-to-face interaction, which may be equated with what Goffman calls the “interaction order”; we will refer to communicative actions on this level as immediate contexts; here interactants communicate by the whole range of bodily symptoms and highly intense interlocking of motives and dense co-ordination of action occurs.

2. the social world in “potential reach” which we can act towards and which can act upon us by (nowadays mostly technologically mediated action by which mediate contexts are constructed.

3. communicative, “symbolic” action with social collectivities, such as the state, society, the church; this level, which transcends the actual and potential reach of communicators, may be termed the societal context.

It should be stressed again that each of these contexts is constructed by communicative actions. For this reason, we ought to refer to them in the active mode as ‘contextualisations’ i.e. to three different ‘horizons’ of contextualisation. (Within phenomenology, ‘horizon’ has been used to refer to different degrees of reach of typifications and action projects.) Yet it is not only for the sake of brevity that we continue to talk about ‘contexts’. There is also a methodological reason for doing so: although subject to ongoing construction processes in social reality, we have to ‘reconstruct’ the order of these processes from the perspective of a scientific method rather than reconstruct them. In this methodological perspective, context is a theoretical “second-order construct” (Schütz 1962) which refers empirically to and has to be distinguished from the ongoing construction processes, the actors’ meanings and the reflexively produced, i.e. contextualised, order of their communicative actions.

4.1. Immediate contexts

Schütz’ first type of social action, ‘direct’ or ‘immediate’ social action, corresponds to the immediate contexts. This sphere of face-to-face interaction where both interactants are within mutual reach resembles what Mead has
called the primary "manipulatory sphere". To Schütz, this immediate context is of primary importance since it is this and only this context in which the participants have access to the fullness of each other's bodily symptoms (Schütz 1962a); one could say that it is characterised by the broadest range of intertwined modalities of communication, ranging from visual to acoustic, tactile and olfactory. Moreover these "symptoms" are perceived, interpreted and enacted in, so to speak, a holistic way. (In this respect Schütz, like Goffman, stressed the presence of bodies).

But there is another reason for the peculiarity of this "pure we-relations" or "encounter" (Schütz 1964a) as the "prototype of all social interaction" (Berger/Luckmann 1967/84: 31). It is here that the principle of reciprocity is elaborated to its fullest extent. It is here that the actions of A are produced in a "polythetical way" both with respect to time and modalities, and received by the addressee in shared, common time (which allows for the complex interlocking of action and motives in face-to-face interaction). It is this sharing of the polythetic constitution which is the basis for the "we-relation".

This stress on the peculiarity and the distinctiveness of face-to-face interaction can also be found in the work of Erving Goffman. There are two reasons why Goffman can be regarded as the most important analyst of the immediate context or, as Giddens (1987: 115) puts it, the "theorist of co-presence": first, he analyzed the rituals and strategies of face-to-face interaction in greater detail than Schütz; secondly, he stressed the distinctness and peculiarity of this "sphere" which he came to call the "interaction order" (1981b).

In fact, Goffman not only analysed forms of rituals and strategies within this "order" (by the use of different metaphors, such as role, move, ritual etc.), he also stressed the contexts created by these actions which he called, interchangeably, "natural bounded units", "basic interaction units", "basic substantive units", "their recurrent structures and their attendant processes" (cf. Williams 1980: 211). And although he rarely mentioned the role of communication in the construction of these units, he concentrated in most of his later work on the role of communication in "framing" situations. The immediate context is mainly made up of the social situation, i.e. when at least two interactants are in co-presence. In order to grasp the specificity of the multitude of interactions situations, Goffman analysed different "ambulatory units" and types of social situation ("contact", "encounter", "social occasion", "gathering" etc.) which form the basis of the distinction between different kinds of immediate context.

In building on the results of conversation analysis, Goffman (1981) also showed that the basic verbal and non-verbal (ritual as well as "systemic") structures of exchanging actions (such as conversational pair sequences) may constitute a fundamental element of immediate contexts, exhibiting both a general applicability to highly different purposes as well as a very strong "context sensitivity", i.e. a capacity to shape specific contexts. At the most basic level of immediate contexts we can identify the bounded communicative episodes as communicative patterns or genres (Günther and Knoblauch 1995).

Communicative patterns, such as sayings, narratives, greetings and other "genre"-like forms, such as conversion stories, jokes or tall stories, may be considered to be communicative contexts for the particular communicative actions or action sequences by which they are constituted, insofar as the actors orient to and anticipate them as longer action sequences. These patterns usually exhibit an elementary structure of a beginning, middle and end which is constructed by the participants. As a frame of communicative orientation and a means of co-ordinating actions, these patterns have the function of relieving actors of the task of negotiating each communicative sequence step by step. They may therefore be said to solve a certain communicative problem in such a way as to provide frameworks of expectation in common situations.

In the course of interaction, actors often produce chains of different communicative patterns, i.e. a greeting ritual may be followed by gossip, then by a joke, etc. The sequence of certain patterns and genres may thus constitute specific social or, to be more exact, communicative situations. Situations which are constructed communicatively can be described as 'aggregations' of sequences of different communicative patterns, the typicality of the situation being dependent on the combination of particular patterns coproduced by the interactants. In some cases, the interactants seem to follow typical expectations of communicative conduct, producing a structured sequence of events; situations which appear to the observer as more formally patterned may be called "communicative occasions"; this holds, for example, for the "genres" of medical consultation (Heath 1986), sales speeches (Knoblauch 1987), or church assemblies and meetings of "Anonymous groups" (Knoblauch 1995: 145-161). Communicative occasions seem not only to be structured in terms of the linguistic means used; non-verbal communicative actions also exhibit a structure with respect to "shared space" (which may also be endowed with other cultural signs), expected time shared, situational identities, partici-
pation status and the constellation within a participation framework (Güntner and Knoblauch 1995).

Whereas all these features of different communicative occasions may vary to a considerable degree, some are characterised by a focused communicative event; in line with research in the folklore of communication, we may call these events *performances* (Bauman 1990). Performances may not only include 'traditional high art' events but also events such as brethren-meetings (Borker 1986), tale-singers in Turkish coffee-houses (Basgöz 1975) or publicly-staged political debates in front of an audience.

Despite their differences, there is one thing these contexts have in common: they are immediate contexts, i.e. they form what Goffman (1981b) has called a "micro-ecological orbit" constituted through communication. As already mentioned, Goffman was very explicit in stressing the distinctiveness of this "interaction order" as a "reality sui generis" by distinguishing it from what he called the "social order", i.e. institutional organisation, class differences, modes of production etc. This distinction is at its clearest where Goffman analyses the "interfaces" between the interaction order and the more traditional elements of social organisation: Goffman considers different kinds of key situations, people-processing-encounters and ceremonial occasions to constitute such interfaces with the social structure, the political and economic system. But although he conceded that letters and telephone conversations constitute special cases of interaction, he did not, surprisingly, account for one important "interface" which is currently becoming important in our daily lives: mediated communication.

4.2. *Contexts of mediated communication*

The notion of mediation is derived from Schütz' theory of action. By mediated social action he means actions which are either transmitted in space (such as phone calls) or delayed in time (such as letters).

Since it is obvious that phone calls or letters are almost by definition communicative, we will use the expression *mediated communicative action*. The main feature of mediated communicative action, however, is negative. It is distinguished from immediate face-to-face interaction by participants' lack of access to and use of full bodily symptoms and the whole range of intersubjective reciprocity. Whereas immediate contexts are characterised by the "primary manipulative zone", mediated contexts are built up within what Schütz (and Mead) call the secondary manipulative zone (Schütz and Luckmann 1979: 69ff, 313).

Mediation is, of course, made possible by certain "technologies of mediation" which are applied in an immediate context. Technologies of mediation make communicative actions accessible to other immediate contexts. The means may be quite different: broken branches on trees may signify where to go, a letter may be intended to be read after my departure, electronic mail or telephone chat may be used to establish a common but mediated context between participants. Yet, despite their 'mediatedness', the communality of mediated contexts and the principle of reciprocity typical of immediate communicative action still apply to the immediate form: any communicative action is *per definitionem* designed to be received by someone else, and whenever the reception occurs, the understanding, response or reaction establishes a minimal structure on which mediated contexts are built.

It is obvious that there are different degrees of mediation: whereas a chat or sales talk on the phone establishes a social relation at least for a short "lived time", the design of an advertisement is generally addressed to anonymous recipients who are conceived of in a very mediated, anonymous and generalised way as market research "target groups", "focus group", "implicit readers" of novels or TV audiences. Thus, mediated contexts vary according to their degree of "interactivity", i.e. the possibility of establishing a reciprocals relationship between participants. Unlike immediate contexts, reciprocity is restricted as regards the "fullness of bodily symptoms" with which we may reciprocally communicate (we hear other people's voices, see digitally produced pictures of them, read their letters but not touch them). Even more importantly, mediated contexts are characterised by "anonymisation": the means which are used in mediated communication are dependent on what may be transmitted technically.

On this basis, Schütz (1962a) has already suggested that the use of highly anonymous signs in mediated communication can transform the "we"-relation of immediate interaction into a "th-relation" (referring to the second person plural "you") in which we communicate reciprocally as typical actors on the basis of anonymised signs and emblems. On these grounds, Soeffner (1992) has recently argued that in modern, complex society most interactions are guided by the standardised emblems and forms of self-representation with which membership of "style groups" is expressed. This argument has been confirmed by recent empirical life-style research (Schulze 1992) which shows
that these communicative forms are the basis of "scenes" and "milieus" and thus constitute mediated contexts on the basis of anonymisation only. By 'scenes' is meant face-to-face settings in which actors are communicating with each other on the basis of anonymous typifications, such as 'raver', 'Scientologist' or 'nudist'. Milieus are made up of scenes.

With respect to mass communication, this anonymisation is more obvious. In order to maintain the possibility of synchronising intentions and co-ordinating actions, mediated contexts increasingly require not only anonymisation but also standardisation of signs. This obviously holds for the traditional means of mediated communication; love letters, war declarations or business orders follow a certain, standardised pattern (which has already been subject to classical rhetorical analysis). It also holds for conventional forms of mass communication; advertisements, television prayers or radio advice programmes take on genre-like forms which may become ritualised or even "canonised", e.g. the television sermon. The intended action is conveyed to the addressees by means of these standardised patterns. Anonymisation also holds for the so-called interactive media; although a wide variety of communicative actions are conceivable, messages on electronic mail exhibit patterns that are as strong as the messages on answering machines (Knoblauch and Alvarez-Caccura 1991); the same can be said about the new conventions in computer-mediated communication which range from certain signs (such as "BTW" for "by the way") to the already conventionalised design of internet "homepages". In fact, in terms of communicative culture, instead of an 'anarchic variety' of new forms, these new means of communication have produced only a small number of new communicative conventions. Because of this standardisation effect of mediated communication, one could even speak of a "secondary traditionalisation of communication" supporting the new "media culture". Since addressees of mediated communication can only be orientated towards "modo subintenti" (Schütz and Luckmann 1984: 123), anonymisation even affects the status of participants in mediated interactions; whereas in phone calls "situated identities" are built up by standardised means (such as a 'joyful' voice, a complacent remark, "giving a mail order" etc.), phone tags on answering machines may construct a network of "telephone-relations", and participation in an internet address may turn one into a fan of a particular soap opera. These situated identities become most pertinent in the case of communicatively mediated work, e.g. computer supported co-operative work (Heath et al. 1995). The contexts built up by these networks consist of series of standardised work activities in which certain tasks (e.g. guiding an aeroplane to its gate) are performed and the identity of each participant defined.

Standardisation seems to be a general feature of mediated communication, constituting what may be called "media culture". Media culture consists of communicative conventions within a network of technologically mediated communication, including mass communication between single senders and a mass audience as well as individualised mediated communication, e.g. electronic mail messages to particular receivers (or letters by mail). As Crane (1992) has shown, media culture not only builds on local social occasions in the interaction order (such as urban exhibitions, shows, performances), it may itself take the form of a social event, e.g. the focused interaction of a television audience with a particular TV show. (Of course, there is no single media culture, and investigation of the different contexts which develop on this basis is of great significance for the understanding of modern culture.)

Media culture rests on the material basis of technological mediation systems (ranging from telegraph-lines to satellites). This material basis introduces an important social structural element into mediated culture (and, as we shall see, into societal contexts). This "infrastructure" is the basis for the development of social networks as a structural component of media culture, i.e. the continuous communicative relations which are built up through mediated communication. Networks can be dependent on regular interaction, such as phone-"elective" relations, regular anonymous reception of mass-mediated communication (such as fan mail for particular movies), or, more directly, on the technical network of the means of communication such as the internet. Yet they impose certain structural restrictions on culture: the availability and accessibility of the systems and their use introduce "abstract" social differences of power, wealth, and knowledge at this level.

4.3. The societal context, symbolic reality and hegemony

Mediated contexts may be anonymous or they may be constructed by technological means; yet in principle they are characterised by reciprocity — as passive as the reception by a communication participant can ever be. This feature does not hold if we move on to large social collectivities, such as "society", "nation" or "country". Whereas sociologists traditionally conceive of such phenomena in terms of social structure, from the point of view of a
communicative approach to culture they appear to differ from the other two contexts because they cannot be addressed either by immediate or mediated communication. This is also the reason why Schütz conceived of these realities as symbolic:

Social collectivities and institutionalised relations, however, are (...) constructs of common-sense thinking (...). For this very reason, we can apprehend them only symbolically; but the symbols representing them themselves pertain to the paramount reality and motivate our actions within it" (Schütz 1962a: 353).

The notion of society as a symbolic reality, however, should neither mean to reify social collectivities nor ascribe them an ontological status. Nor should they be reduced to a cognitive category (as e.g. Husserl or Cooley have done) since their reality is not constructed or maintained by “cognitive activities” alone. To speak of social collectivities as symbolic realities means that they are contexts which are continuously constructed by communicative actions. Yet, the societal context is the realm of symbolic communication, i.e. of symbolically mediated knowledge and action, the symbolically shaped cosmos of world-views and of the traditions embedded therein (Soffner 1990). Symbolic communication may even (and has to) make use of the very means which apply in other contexts: of the forms of immediate communication, mediated technology or the signs of anonymous communication. Yet, in contrast to immediate and mediated communication, symbolic communication refers to a reality beyond that in which each communication partner is communicating. Be it the Prime Minister, the President or the Chancellor, their acts of communication are still located in the interaction order of their life-world and transmitted by television, newspaper or radio. Their difference from other contexts is that they additionally “represent” something else; they are “appresenting”14 an order that is not tangible by means of different symbols; the Stars and Stripes, the ceremonial presentation as “head of government”. It is this reference to and representation of an order which makes these actions symbolic actions. Thus, as Gumperz (1981) has shown with respect to linguistic minorities (such as Slovenian in Austria, German in Alsace or Catalan in Spain), speakers may communicate their ethnic identity by stressing their membership of a speech community through the use of a particular language variety.

A special feature of symbolic communication is its lack of reciprocity. In his proposal concerning the development of a political civic identity within large social collectivities such as the European Union, Habermas tries to go beyond this feature by suggesting that civic identity may develop if the citoyens are able to interact communicatively on a reciprocal basis with this cosmon, by for example voting. However, in suggesting that reciprocity may be established in the future, he presupposes that the European Union is already being affected by symbolic communication, i.e. communicative actions which do not presuppose reciprocity.

The symbolic reality of social collectivities is particularly dependent on the means of communication by which it becomes defined and legitimated to a wider public. Typically, these means of communication are unequally distributed. Different elites of societies dispose of and fight for access to these means of communications (an observation supported by mass media research). This inequality of access to and disposal of the means of communication is best expressed by Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Hegemony means that certain social groups define the symbolic values dominant in a particular society (Laitin 1986: 105). The power to define these values is, of course, dependent on access to the means of communication and competence in using them. Hegemony is to be distinguished from ideology in that other social groups are not excluded from these values. The symbolic values are negotiated with other social groups in order to involve them in the common cosmon: “that is, hegemony is not maintained through the obliteration of the opposition but through the articulation of opposing interests into the political affiliations of the hegemonic group” (Turner 1992: 212). Since it is achieved through the articulation of interests, the hegemonic version of the cosmon is, almost by definition, a communicative construction.

Hegemonic versions may, of course, be contested, and there may be conflicts about hegemony between the different social groups involved. These conflicts are reflected in the communicative constructions of what Silverstein (1979) calls the “linguistic ideology”. The very use of certain communicative forms indexicalizes, so to speak, social groups. By way of this social indexicalisation, the communicative actions by which the cosmon is constructed, maintained and changed are linked to the social structure. Thus it is not only the access and availability of the means of communication, i.e. the political economy, which supports the hegemony of certain groups; hegemonic inequality is expressed in and reflected by communicative forms, metapragmatic notions of language use, relations of genres to social categories and linguistic economy.
The unequal distribution of the means of communication may be described in terms of what Luckmann (1986) calls the “communicative budget”, i.e. the totality of communicative forms which affect a society’s continuity and change. Communicative budget refers to the unequal distribution of communicative forms with respect to social milieus and institutional structures. Thus, the notion of a communicative budget also implicates the unequal distribution of the means of communication, thereby maintaining reflexivity of communication even at the “meso-” and “macro-” social levels: social milieus and institutional structures are not related to, but constituted by the communicative actions which are typical of them. Economic communication, for example, takes on specific forms which make it observable as economic; the same holds for religious, political or scientific communication; and even phenomena of institutional dissolution (such as the effects of religious “secularisation”) are expressed in and can be seen to be constituted by specific communicative forms, e.g. the use of conversion in Anonymous groups.

5. Contexts, culture and intercultural communication

As early as the 1930s Alfred Schütz had begun to analyse the world of everyday life. In his view the life-world in which we live and act is always a social and cultural one. It is culture which gives it its taken-for-granted character. Culture thus not only comprises ‘mastery’ of nature but also people’s knowledge, ideas and meanings. Culture involves the set of typifications of objects, ideas and actions, and a system of relevance which guides preferences for objects, ideas and action that are common to a certain group. Moreover, culture is not simply a “cognitive” phenomenon which allows us to “interpret” the world; it also imparts actions and is a pre-minent social phenomenon: “Culture and civilisation patterns of group life” include “all the peculiar valuations, institutions, and systems of orientation and guidance (such as folklore, mores, laws, habits, customs, etiquette, fashions) which (...) characterise — if not constitute — any social group at a given moment in history” (Schütz 1964: 92). It is by way of interactions that cultural meanings are negotiated. Since these negotiations are performed by communicative actions, the socio-cultural world of everyday life is not only being continuously constructed, it is also essentially cultural. Since “only here [i.e. in the world of everyday life, HK] communication with our consociates is possible” (Schütz/Luckmann 1984: 306), this sociocultural life-world is constructed through communication. Building on the theory of Schütz as well as other empirical approaches to communication, we have argued that since the culture of the world of everyday life is constructed by means of communicative acts, it is essentially a communicative culture. By communicative culture we want to stress that culture cannot be reduced to knowledge, meaning, or sign-systems only. Communicative culture is neither located in the mind nor in the objectified system or discourse: it is produced, realised, and transformed in communicative actions.

True, the notion of the communicative culture of everyday life is only suggested by Schütz; yet it may provide a foundation for corresponding concepts of culture. Thus Burke (1979: 37) suggests that in history culture can be grasped by means of communicative forms. Wuthnow (1992) takes this even further with the notion of a “new sociology of culture” which considers culture to be mainly communicative. Culture consists of the discourses, texts, symbolic practices and communicative events that constitute the ongoing stream of social life. Wuthnow and Witten (1988: 53f) also suggest defining culture in terms of discourse and practice. From the perspective of the communicative approach, then, culture is not only “enacted”, it is to be seen as a continuous process of meaning construction through communicative action.

In drawing on Schütz’s theory, we have tried to show that the order of this construction process is accomplished through routine, typified forms, patterns and conventions of communicative action. On this basis we distinguished different contexts of what Schütz and Luckmann (1979: 25) call “common communicative environments”: immediate, mediated and societal contexts, each characterised by a specific form of communicative action (face-to-face communication, mediated communication and symbolic communication). Communicative culture is the mediated and immediate communicative actions and communicative forms performed in this society. With respect to social structure, communicative culture depends on the distribution of the means of communication; but it is even more dependent on the differentiated use of communicative actions and communicative forms of which it is constituted and by which it is structured into communicative situations, milieus and institutional organisations.

This notion of cultural context allows us to evade the common distinction of two ontological spheres of contexts, such as “outer” social structural context which appears to be “external” to interaction, and “inner” context...
which seems to be immanent to interaction. The proposed concept of context, rather, suggests that the different analytically distinct horizons of context are interlocked, i.e. these contexts do not exist in isolation: “each of us is living in all three spheres at the same time: in the immediate sphere as well as in the symbolically constructed one” (Soëffner 1990: 67). Thus, by contextualising a certain immediate context (e.g. a managers’ meeting), participants may simultaneously carry out symbolic communicative acts, thereby contextualising their membership of ethnic, national or (with respect to certain symbolically highly charged professions, such as soldiers, politicians, priests or international sportspersons) professional collectivities. To give another example, work in high technology settings is frequently concerned with the management of activities by locally dispersed actors whose actions are coordinated by information and communication technologies. Yet, due to standardised and anonymised features of this technologically mediated communication, the factual use of these technologies depends on and is accomplished by face-to-face communication, in work situations, thereby linking mediated with immediate contexts. One should also stress that the adoption of three forms of contextualisation is simply a heuristic distinction based on general theoretical categories. As the examples have shown, the process of contextualisation requires distinctions that are much more subtle.

Using the general approach presented here, we not only propose a refined notion of communicative culture but also a sophisticated rationale for the problem of intercultural communication which will allow the notion itself to be redefined. It is commonly assumed that culture is something which is bounded and self-contained; this assumption is even presupposed in the notion of intercultural communication, which is regarded as communication between bounded cultures. If, however, we conceive of culture as contexts, we can try to identify different aspects of intercultural communication and focus on different aspects of context which do not (as is currently termed) “enter into” but constitute interaction. Without an a priori assumption of boundedness for culture which is ‘interpenetrated’ by intercultural communication, culture itself turns out to be constructed by communicative actions.

Culture, cultural habits and differences are not isolated entities but are embedded in and constructed by interactive processes (Güntner 1993: 16). Intercultural communication is thus not alien to culture but is itself contextualising in the ways described above. This may be best illustrated by the phenomenon of code-switching in multilingual societies, in which situations of intercultural communication are part of everyday life (Güntner 1993: 13ff). As Gumperz (1982) has shown, the switch by Indian minority language speakers to the majority language Hindi does not simply depend on caste relationships but on types of social interactions and situations, such as formal, goal-oriented (“transactional”) conversations or informal talk about personal matters. Code-switching by speakers’ of Slovenian in German speaking Austria is dependent on the typification of social situations. Thus certain types of situations and even activities carried out through language in the ‘interaction order’ are contextualised by the selection of a linguistic code. Code-switching is also shown to contextualise larger contexts. In an investigation of communicative forms of speakers in different areas of Belfast, Milroy (1980) has shown that speakers not only contextualise situations but also their membership of specific social networks which thereby constitute their local speech communities. The reason for the mediation of communicative contexts in intercultural communication can be seen in structural changes of ‘ethnicity’. Whereas ‘old ethnicity’ has been a “community of the ground” (Gumperz 1990), a “place-defined group” (Fitzgerald 1992: 113 ) linked by recurrent interaction, “new ethnicity” is based on different kinds of communication network. Communication by different interactive media, such as the telephone or the use of mass media (television, radio, newspapers) enables this kind of ethnicity to be contextualised as a “community of the mind”, a speech community sharing communicative habits by way of mediated communicative actions. Mediated and mass communication are also the means by which the symbolic reality of speech communities may be produced. Thus Anderson (1983) has shown how newspapers, book print and other forms of media communication lead to the construction of an imagined community on a larger scale, such as “nation”. Yet, because of its dependence on the means of mediated communication, the construction of this “imagined community” is subject to economic developments and political interests. To give an example, as a result of increasing urbanisation, industrialisation and political centralisation, the ‘symbolic value’ of the Hungarian speech community in Austria (Gal 1979) has deteriorated in favour of the German speech community. Moreover, by gaining access to the means of communication, certain “pressure groups” may attempt to communicate (more or less intentionally and ideologically) ethnicity, social groups and nations, thereby constructing highly symbolic contexts — a process which has recently increased in importance as a result of the recent spreading of ethnic conflicts and the creation of new ethnicities.
The notion of communicative culture built up by different forms of contextualisation in communicative actions is thus necessary for an understanding of the complexity and differentiation of modern intercultural communication. According to this view, what is usually considered to be one culture turns out to be itself "pluricultural", consisting of a myriad of different contexts. The distinction between different horizons of communication may be one way to understand this culture from a theoretical point of view. Ethnographic analyses of communication in various sociocultural life worlds may be an empirical way of understanding cultural difference — whether or not the difference is a relevant feature of an actor's communication. Either way, the implication is that cultures in modern societies are structurally characterised by pluralism. As a result, the phenomena hitherto considered to be intercultural communication themselves constitute contexts within and as part of pluralistic culture.

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Notes

1. With the exception of e.g. David Bogen (1989).
2. Habermas refers to Popper's theory of three worlds as subjective, social, and objective spheres. These are addressed by expressive, regulatory, and propositional utterance and correspond to different forms of social action; with respect to communicative action, he adds a fourth function, understanding.
3. Habermas tries to overcome this problem by over-stressing the notion of the "illocutionary force" of utterances; yet he still maintains that their illocutionary force depends on their semantic content.
4. Following Luckmann (1979), we prefer to speak of a phenomenologically orientated sociology since philosophical phenomenology provides only the foundations of the empirical science of sociology.
5. For a detailed analysis of the constitution of signs cf. Luckmann (1983).

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