

Global English: The Indispensable Bridge in Intercultural Communication?

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Abstract

We were fooling ourselves if we thought that, by spreading the use of English as a common global language, we were building the ultimate bridge to international peace and understanding. We are now in an era in which globalization increases inequalities and competitiveness between economies and cultures; the “engagement algorithms” of social media not only foster new friendships, they also spread untruths and fear; and the English linguistic sign is increasingly reduced to a commodified or empty signifier. More than ever, our times call for more than communicative competence, tolerance of and respect for others – values supposedly vehiculated through English in intercultural communication. They urgently call for a critical understanding of the role that symbolic systems like Global English, global marketing discourses and the discourse of global ideological competition play in constituting the distressing world we live in. What we need in language education is a kind of symbolic competence that includes the ability to understand the symbolic universe in which utterances and texts are produced, identify the symbolic power struggles at work in face to face and online interactions, and be wary of the new A.I. systems that risk upending our efforts to understand one another across cultures. On two examples of “intercultural competence”, one in China, the other on Chat GPT, this paper reflects on how the globalization of English has changed the nature of intercultural communication and how an understanding of symbolic power is needed to come to grips with the changes.

Keywords: intercultural competence, Global English, commodified signifier, empty signifier, locus of enunciation

Introduction

The notion of bridge has always been attractive to land developers, trade partners, and language teachers¹. The architects of the Tower of Babel imagined a vertical monolingual bridge between the material and the spiritual worlds, while the construction workers on the Breughel paintings were busy communicating with one another in multiple languages through intricate archways, pathways, and causeways (Streck, 2003). The bridge metaphor has captured the imagination of

¹ This paper is a reworked version of a keynote I gave at the IRAAL conference on 30 September 2022 at the Munster Technological University in Cork, Ireland. I wish to thank Muiris Ó Laoire and Jennifer Bruen for giving me the opportunity to reflect here on the notion of “bridge” in Applied Linguistics that was the theme of that conference.

researchers and practitioners in applied linguistics, who see their role as facilitating international exchanges by spreading the use of a common Global English, fostering communication and mutual understanding across borders through common social media, and breaking down disciplinary, cultural and epistemological boundaries in applied linguistic research (e.g. Jenkins, 2015).

But bridges are also instruments of power and control. There has always been a tension between the formal steel and concrete bridges built by governments and monolingual institutions on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the myriad informal practices of everyday life occurring in multiple languages and dialects around and underneath official bridges. As a metaphoric example, I like to take the Oyapock river bridge between French Guyana and Brazil - a magnificent bridge conceived by heads of nation-states, whose troubled construction between 1997 and 2017 shows that without proper infrastructure and administrative political integration such a bridge is of no use to the local farmers, fishermen, and tradesmen who daily criss-cross the Oyapock river in their small boats and ferries². They have to resolve their intercultural differences through a languaging competence that I have called “symbolic competence” (Kramsch, 2011) that is attuned to symbolic power struggles (e.g., emotional and political manipulation, facework, microaggression, persuasion tactics and suggestion strategies, see Bourdieu, 1991; Kramsch, 2021) and the contradictions of the local and the global in the use of English as a *lingua franca*.

In this essay, I reflect on how Applied Linguistics has dealt with this dual nature of the field: the global spread of English that was intended to provide a global bridge for intercultural communication around the world and the symbolic power struggles between ongoing national

² I wish to thank Olivier Kramsch for this insight that he developed in Kramsch (2016).

and digital forces that are changing the very nature and use of English and that challenge its Western neocolonial ambitions. I illustrate these challenges by examining excerpts from two very different and seemingly unrelated events: the latest national contest of intercultural competence for college students of English in China, and an exchange between a Chinese intercultural communication scholar and ChatGPT regarding a cross-cultural critical incident. The two events have in common the use of English in a globalized and digitized world economy that seeks ways to build intercultural bridges between its members. I discuss these two cases as examples of the major changes occurring at present in the shadow of the official intercultural ‘bridge’ represented by English as a Global Language.

1.The Lure of the Cross-, Inter-, Trans- in English Language Teaching/Applied Linguistics

Since its inception, the field of applied linguistics has been interested in connecting individuals who speak different languages and live in different cultures, by linking the theory and practice of language acquisition, and by crossing disciplinary boundaries in language-related research (Hawkins & Mori 2018). Born from the need to teach English around the world after WWII, Applied Linguistics has considered English to be the global bridge par excellence³. The Anglophone research in the cross-cultural, the interdisciplinary and, more recently, the translingual and transcultural (Kramsch, 2018) is evidence of a world-wide effort to make English relevant to the local needs of speakers of other languages by making the language itself

³ The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) of the U.S. Department of Education claims that one of the primary benefits brought by English as a global language is the fact that it bridges the communication gap between countries. Because “it is utilized as a tool of communication, empowerment and unification of people in the global community, it unites all the people around the globe regardless of their nationalities, cultural backgrounds, or races” (Mohamadsaid & Rasheed 2019).

multilingual through “translanguaging” (Garcia & Li, 2014). Translation is making a comeback in Applied Linguistics now that Google Translate uses English as a bridge to translate all the other languages into one another (Vinall & Hellmich, 2022)

Today’s globalized applied linguistics makes visible the universalist, neocolonial aspects of many of these trans- efforts. The spatial metaphor of “translingualism” often conceals the historical depth of the “colonial difference” it purports to bridge (Mignolo, 2000). The innocuous sounding term “translanguaging” occludes the power differences between English and other languages (Block 2018). Indeed, for many people around the world, English is no longer a “foreign” language; it is the language of the world’s educated elite who uses computer-mediated means of communication, social media, Google, Facebook and ChatGPT and who can afford to code-switch between English and the local language for “*couleur locale*”. The colonial difference remains. Whereas for many around the world Global English is the professional, academic, workplace and tourist language, for many speakers of other more local languages the non-English language remains the language of a family, a nation and a cultural tradition. Post-colonial research conducted in languages from the Global South dramatically brings to the fore the inequalities not only in the linguistic structure of these languages but also in the way they index different knowledges about the world and the value attached to different epistemologies (Santos, 2014). The same can be said of the neocolonial relation between former colonial languages like French, Spanish, Portuguese or German, taught as second languages, and the languages of immigrants and indigenous populations in industrialized and digitized societies (e.g., Guerrero, in press; Kramsch, et al. in press).

The power differential between English and all other languages makes such English notions as *translanguaging* (Garcia & Li, 2009), *translingual practice* (Canagarajah, 2013), or

even *interculturality* (Kramsch et al. in press) suspicious of not just building connections between languages and language users, but of transforming the very nature of the elements to be connected. Over the decades, digital communication technologies, designed by speakers of English at Anglophone universities, have imposed on speakers of other languages a discourse style, rhetorical values, and systems of thought compatible with those of English speakers. Some might say that what is being imposed is not the English language per se but a neoliberal economically global mindset that originated in the capitalistic West but now speaks very many different languages around the globe. And it is undoubtedly true that this utilitarian mindset is now making knowledge accessible to everyone. However, by purporting to deregulate the traffic of knowledge and by managing its multiplicity through the global bridge of English, have we not exacerbated the very inequalities we intended to abolish?

We need to examine how the use of Global English resignifies the balance of symbolic power between those who, like native speakers, use the language to refer to things and events in the real world and those who, like many human speakers but also A.I. chatbots, use the language to persuade and manipulate social actors into action through the very power of suggestion of Global English – the most powerful language on earth.

2. Styling the Native Speaker or the Global Consumer? Identity Issues

Learning a foreign language used to mean imitating native speakers of the language, their use of grammatical and lexical structures, their conversational gambits, their discourse strategies in order to make them your own and get to understand their culture on their terms. To pass for a British or an American native speaker of English was the best reward a learner of English could

get. With the identity politics of the 1990's, the lure of the native speaker lost much of its appeal and was replaced by the lure of the global English speaker. Styling the generic English speaker (Grimshaw, 2010) or crossing over into the world of global workers and consumers (Dovchin, 2019; Shin, in press) became a global sport, that increased one's value on the global market (Kramsch, 2012). The success of the spread of English around the world is in large part due not to its pragmatic usefulness when travelling to the U.K or the U.S. but to its symbolic power to index economic opportunity and cosmopolitan sophistication (Kramsch, 2020)⁴. But it can also enable the double-speak that any styling or crossing is likely to generate. Indeed, displaying this symbolic power enables speakers to at once locate themselves socially in the global realm of English, and to think from a different epistemic geopolitical position grounded in a different language and history. Scholars such as Rampton (1999), Grimshaw (2010), Kramsch (2012) or Dovchin (2019) have researched the way speakers often use language to perform roles that do not necessarily feature what they really think or who they really are. This symbolic power game has not been lost on learners of English in parts of the world that espouse other values than those traditionally associated with English in Western countries (e.g., Hopkyns, 2020).

Two incidents taken from my own experience can serve as examples. The first one occurred in Beijing at a conference for English teachers. Two Chinese teachers of English were talking to each other in a lively manner in Chinese, when all of a sudden one of them exclaimed *Thank you!* in English. Since I don't speak Chinese, I asked her what she had thanked the other for. She responded:

⁴ The advertisement "Learn Wall Street English!" in the Paris Metro clearly indexes not only the informational, but the symbolic and financial value of acquiring the English language.

Well... she had made me a compliment. You see, we Chinese don't make as many compliments as you Americans, and when we do we never say thank you for a compliment. That would sound too self-serving. But I knew that nowadays you have to say something, so I said *thank you* in English, like that I said it without really meaning it!

The second incident occurred on February 4, 2022 in Beijing when Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping declared publicly in a joint statement in English that there were “no limits” to their countries’ friendship. This remark caused a flurry of anxiety in the Western press. Fu Cong, China’s ambassador to the E.U. speaking about this joint statement, immediately declared: “‘no limit’ is nothing but rhetoric” (New York Times (NYT) April 5, 2023).

I wish to use these two examples to illustrate the use of English not so much to inform, but to show that you are “in the know”, “up to date”, “powerful”. The Chinese woman wanted to show that she could speak like a native speaker of English but made sure she was not taken for a native speaker. The Chinese ambassador to the E.U wanted to show that he could address the world in the world’s global language, but that he retained the privilege to disclaim ownership of the words spoken. How do such complex uses of Global English represent intercultural competence?

On 1 March 2023, a webinar was organized by a professor at the Intercultural Institute of the Shanghai International Studies University in China on the theme: “Developing foreign language learners’ identities towards interculturality and competencies”. Presenters were sent the following question: Why and how does language learning lead to attitude change and identity development?

YM, a doctoral student at the Institute currently working on the notion of intercultural competence, explained to me in an email:

Here, they regard attitude change as an essential component of identity development, commonly used in the phrase “identity (re)construction” by many foreign scholars. For example, foreign language learning has played an essential role in (re)constructing

*learners' identities through communication. And there are three factors involved: foreign language learning, identity work, and subjective experience. Foreign language learning transforms who we are and what we can do; thus, it is an experience of identity. Learning is a process of becoming or avoiding becoming a certain person rather than a simple accumulation of knowledge and skills. When people learn a second language, they do so as individuals with their multiple and dynamic identities and social histories. Simultaneously, the learning process challenges and questions their original identity; I guess this is what the Chinese professor tried to express as identity development (personal communication)*⁵

I started to suspect that YM and her professor were using the term “reconstruction” differently from Western researchers who see identity as multiple, changing and conflictual (Norton, 2013), whereas in China the goal of learning foreign languages seems to be to develop a strong national Chinese identity⁶.

CK: I am still wondering why and how Chinese students studying abroad need to have their identities "reconstructed." I can see where they need to develop empathy and intercultural understanding, but if they just study at a foreign university for a year or two, why do they have to adopt a new identity or reconstruct their old one?

YM's answer that follows gave me a lot to think about. She started by quoting Western sources, then elaborated on them and applied them to the Chinese case.

YM: I would like first to quote the words from the international program office of Brown University [in Providence, Rhode Island]:

[Study abroad provides the opportunity to reflect on] “the awareness of the values and way of life of your own country, your own place in that country, and its place in the world.” (Office of International Programs, 2023)

*Thus, as Dolby (2004) remarks, study abroad provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself—particularly one's national identity—in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self. Actually, it's not that the Chinese students studying abroad **need to** have their “identities” constructed, but they do so **naturally**. I think this kind of change may be brought by three combined factors: knowledge, attitude, and reflection.*

⁵ I reproduce these excerpts of our email exchange here with YM's permission.

⁶ Norton's theory of identity is used by Chinese educators in their discussions on intercultural competence, although Norton herself tends to conflate social and cultural identity as “the relationship between individuals and members of a group who share a common history, a common language and similar ways of understanding the world”. (2013, p. 56)

Specifically, when studying abroad, students gain knowledge both in and out of class, which allows them to know others and themselves from a new perspective, echoing the old Chinese saying: Man who travels far knows more. (knowledge)

In addition, through interaction with teachers and peers in the host country, the participants found that their assumptions about national identities (i.e., pre-departure perceptions of their home country) were challenged in unfamiliar ways. At the same time, the awareness of their cultural identity is raised, like being Chinese. In other words, rather than being passive learners in the traditional classroom setting, they engage in egalitarian dialogues through their encounters with the host country, allowing them to actively examine previous notions of self and nation on their terms. As Dolby (2004) argues, national identity can shift from a passive to an active identity in the study abroad context. For example, Chinese national identity is often invisible in contexts where Chinese is accepted as the norm. Chinese identity is only invigorated in a situation where Chinese students become the other.

Besides, the stereotype will be challenged through interaction with people from other countries, and one's attitude toward others may change too. For example, Gao's study (2011) focuses on Chinese learners' raising self-awareness of being Chinese and their attitudes toward Japanese students, South Korean students, and students from Taiwan. This study found that during their English language learning journeys in Britain, the Chinese learners tended to affirm and often displayed their membership concerning China and Chinese national imagination, contributing to heightened senses of Chinese national identity and increased patriotism. At the same time, the experience of interacting with Japanese students, South Korean students, and students from Taiwan encouraged the Chinese learners to question and critically reexamine their attitudes and values related to their national identities. (Attitude)

Lastly, studying abroad allows students to reflect on their awareness of their home country's values and ways of life. When they integrate a new set of values into their thinking, this tends to lead to a critical review of both sets of values and ways of thought. Effectively, the elements that make up an individual's national identity are brought under scrutiny (Byram, 1992). With this shift of emphasis from exclusion to inclusion in constructing American identity, students achieve not necessarily the "global citizenship" celebrated in study abroad literature, which in reality is a rather elusive and nebulous concept, but, instead, form a national identity that is "reflective and self-conscious and moves away from the narrow, ethnocentric, exclusive idea of nation that are commonly associated with the United States" (Jack in Dolby, 2007, p. 151). (Reflection)"

Much of what YM kindly explained to me in this email sounded familiar. The self-awareness that comes from encountering members of another culture abroad and seeing oneself through their eyes, the new ways of understanding oneself are all familiar aspects of research on study abroad and of foreign language learning in general. It struck me, however, that YM framed her answer to my question by first citing a website from the study abroad program of a Western

university referring to American students studying abroad. She then structured her answer according to the familiar tripartite framework used by Western scholars for academic writing (e.g., Byram 1997, Deardorff 2009): knowledge about others and oneself, attitude towards others, and reflection on one's own values and identity. While she equated the experience of American students abroad with the experience of Chinese students abroad, she seemed to view the purpose of language learning in both cases to be broadening the students' sense of self from a "narrow, ethnocentric, exclusive idea of nation" to a "reflective and self-conscious" sense of national identity, rather than to a "global citizenship" that, she says, Nadine Dolby, Professor of Curriculum Studies at Purdue University, U.S.A, finds "elusive and nebulous".

I wasn't quite sure whether YM herself shared Dolby's misgivings about the notion of global citizenship. Her English was superb, but it wasn't clear whether she was echoing Western research or critiquing the notion of global citizenship in favor of an expanded, more inclusive concept of nationalism, that she was applying to China, as Dolby had applied it to the United States. Nor was it clear whether she adopted uncritically Dolby's view about the U.S. idea of nation being "narrow, ethnocentric and exclusive". In other words, I wasn't sure who YM was *as the writer of this email*, nor how she positioned herself *as a speaker of Global English* and *as a researcher of "intercultural competence"*. The problem as I saw it was one of voice, not grammar, subject position, not linguistic proficiency.

I realized that Global English, by blurring the speaker's subject position or locus of enunciation, i.e., "the geopolitical location of the subject that speaks" (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 213), was particularly prone to misunderstandings and to questionings about the identity of the speaker. As Dovchin documented in the case of Mongolians in Australia, whose crossing into English or Mongolian could be seen as a *resistance or passing* strategy (Dovchin, 2019), and as

Shin describes in the case of a mixed-race youth in South Korea, who uses the fact that his mother is from the Philippines and therefore speaks English, to enhance his own distinction as a “multicultural” Korean (Shin, in press), intercultural competence is intimately linked to the self-constructed and the other-perceived identity of the Global English speaker. In turn, it is deeply associated with the way speakers of Global English make use of linguistic signs. And that use is ambiguous. Is it mainly to communicate, i.e., to “express, interpret and negotiate intended meanings” (Breen and Candlin, 1980) in exchange with others who are from different languages and cultures? Is it to acquire knowledge about self and others and to better understand others (Byram, 1997)? Or is it to better understand yourself as a national and international citizen of your own country?

To explore this further, I decided to examine how YM’s university selected the winners in the national contest of intercultural competence that it organizes every year for Chinese college undergraduates. My purpose here is not to criticize a successful and popular contest, but to examine the intersection of language, culture and identity in the performance of intercultural competence by college level Chinese students in English. After each task, I offer a brief analysis to that effect.

3. Intercultural Competence in a National Contest. The Challenge of the Commodified Signifier.

What can we learn from the 5th *SFLEP National College Students’ Intercultural Communication Contest* that took place on 20 March 2023, sponsored by Shanghai Foreign Language Education

Press based at the Shanghai International Studies University?⁷ Here is the description of this national contest.

The national final contest has two phases:

1) *Intercultural case analysis*. Student teams develop an original intercultural case and act it out in their own way. Students have sufficient time to prepare for this task and usually with the help of their departments and teachers; they are also asked to explain a quote afterward.

2) The top ten teams from the first phase go to the final, where they go through three tests :

a. *Intercultural knowledge test*;

b. *Contextualization test*. Student teams are given a short video on an intercultural issue, they have 30 minutes to prepare, and then present their interpretation and analysis of the video as a team (one minute each).

⁷ The videos from which these data were taken and transcribed by me were released by the organizer SFLEP and made freely accessible to the general public (see references below). *Bilibili* in the reference is the name of the website. It is a popular online entertainment platform in China that offers a wide range of content, primarily focusing on animation, gaming, and user-generated videos. It is often compared to YouTube due to its user-generated content format, but it has a distinct community-oriented atmosphere. The data I use here come from Video 1. The college students on this video are all older than 18 years of age.

Video 1:

外教社,(2023.3.21), 第五届“外教社杯”全国高校学生跨文化能力大赛冠军深圳大学团队 (决赛) [视频], 哔哩哔哩, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV12o4y1B7DM/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.-1

Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (SFLEP). (2023, March 21). *The 5th SFLEP Cup National College Students' Intercultural Competence Contest Champions - Shenzhen University Team (Finals)* [Video]. bilibili, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV12o4y1B7DM/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.-1

Video 2:

外教社,(2023.3.24), 第五届“外教社杯”全国高校学生跨文化能力大赛冠军深圳大学团队 (总决赛) [视频], 哔哩哔哩, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1KM4y1z7df/>

Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (SFLEP). (2023, March 24). *The 5th SFLEP Cup National College Students' Intercultural Competence Contest Champions - Shenzhen University Team (the Grand Finals)* [Video]. bilibili, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1KM4y1z7df/>

c. *Telling a Chinese story*. One of the team members is given a Chinese context as a prompt, and s/he has 20 seconds to prepare before giving a 3-minute speech.

In the following I discuss excerpts from the tasks in each of these phases.

3.1. Intercultural Case Analysis

One of the team of finalists, consisting of three members - one male who played the moderator, two females who played a Chinese and a Spaniard respectively, presented a proposal to build a Chinatown in the center of a fictitious town in Spain to foster intercultural understanding among the residents of the town.

Moderator

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the final round of proposals for Chinatown! The program that you are watching is the Radio Television Hispaniola. We all know Ucera is one of the most charming towns in Spain. Why? Because it is home to more than 10,000 Chinese residents. Considering this vast cultural diversity, the city council of Ucera has decided to put a Chinatown in its center, to optimize the experience of both Spanish people and Chinese locals. And we are very lucky to have with us here the two teams that have made it to the final. They are Julia from China and Caterina from Spain. Let’s give them a round of applause. Ladies, have a seat, have a seat. And congratulations

(Julia and Caterina, role-playing a Chinese and a Spanish woman, describe their plans in one minute each. The moderator then picks up the threads.)

We have been trying to refine the concept of Chinatown. How can we find peaceful ways to integrate two conceptions of Chinatown? Caterina seems to have simplified Chinese culture by suggesting integrating Chinese style with Spanish elements, leading to prejudices and misunderstandings. Julia wanted to underscore the contemporariness of Chinese culture. She made us understand that to get to know a culture it is not enough to know its origin and history, but more importantly we need to know its evolution and contemporary trends. This leads us to the main point of postcolonialism, which is to deconstruct geopolitical and sociopolitical dictatorship. But how can we realize this in a practical way? Here we offer three possible solutions:

1. When encountering cross-cultural issues, always keep an innovative mindset
2. Always have an open-minded attitude
3. Enhance mutual cultural understanding

We also want to take into account the times we are living in, and stress the contextualization of globalization which is taking over our way of thinking, and we want to take into consideration the intersection of aesthetics both synchronously and diachronically. Which means that no one can be an isolated island and no one can prosper without being integrated into a certain community. Therefore it is high time that we abandon overgeneralization of a culture and always keep in mind that we are one.

In the post modern era it is no longer the case that one colonial power can take over another. Even though some developed country and some undeveloped country in the Third World may look distant, they can share the same concept. For instance Chinese food is not only eaten in China, it is eaten all over the world and integrated into the local gastronomy. And Chinese culture can be expressed through Chinese food.”

The students then had to analyze the following quote: “Learn a language, and you’ll avoid a war” (Arab proverb). You have two seconds to think about it. Respond in terms of premise, arguments, conclusion etc.”

Discussion: The students showed remarkable fluency and mid-Atlantic English accents in their performance of various Anglo-American discourses in various genres of public speaking: the talkshow, the townhall, the sales pitch, the academic debate. They used all the conventional collocations (*innovative mindset, open-minded attitude, sense of community, optimization of experience...*). They mastered the rhetorical argumentative skills in English (*first, second, third; therefore; furthermore; for instance, also...*). As a display of English as a global language, their performance was clearly excellent. And yet, whether as a result of the examination format that forces candidates to focus on their own performance qua performance rather than on their interest and concern for the cultural “Other”, or whether they were responding to larger ideological expectations regarding the purpose of intercultural communication, the discourse of this presentation for a Western observer remained puzzling. To what extent did it show evidence of intercultural understanding?

3.2. Intercultural Knowledge Test

Here are a few of the multiple-choice questions that were offered for the second task:

1. Which of the following statements is correct?

- A. Stereotypes are negative and overgeneralized opinions applied to all members of a group.
- B. Prejudice is behavior towards an individual based on one's membership in a particular social group.
- C. *Discrimination occurs when someone acts on prejudiced attitudes toward a group of people.

2. Which of the following statements about conflict management styles is correct?

- A. People who tend toward a dominating style show a high level of concern for others.
- B. People who tend toward an obliging style show a low level of concern for others.
- C. *People who tend toward an integrating style seek for win-win results.

3. Which of the following is NOT listed as an item of intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO:

- A. Art of Chinese seal engraving
- B. Traditional handicrafts of making Xuan paper
- C. *Longjing tea

4. Nordstream is a critical network of pipelines that deliver fuel from

- a. Russia to United States
- b. *Russia to Europe
- c. Russia to China

5. Which of the following is NOT correct about identity

- A. *People determine their identities by themselves
- B. People can perceive their identities from other's reactions.
- C. Identities are constructed through language and discourse.

6. How do you evaluate the following conflict?

At a summer camp, Wang Li, a Chinese girl, became friends with the American girl Emily. When Wang Li tried to put her arm in Emily's arm, Emily felt uneasy and kept Wang's arm off. Wang was being impolite and Emily overreacted to Wang's actions.

- A. Emily was unable to appreciate Wang's behavior.
- B. *Wang should keep a social distance and Emily could try to understand Wang.

Discussion: The first thing that strikes the observer is that the intercultural knowledge tested here pertains either to some aspect of Chinese culture or to the behavior of Chinese when encountering Americans. Behaviors are presented as either good or bad, statements as true or false. The format of the test cannot evaluate the tolerance of ambiguity, the sensitivity to complexity that characterizes intercultural competence. The examples above show how difficult it is to capture the multidimensional, nuanced meanings of intercultural communication through multiple choice tests.

3.3. Contextualisation Test

Discussion by two contestants of a short video on a Chinese corporation named Xiaomi and its efforts to deal with globalization. C. describes *Xiaomi*'s strong sense of corporate identity and its desire to cooperate with *Nokia*, out of respect for each other and their mutual interests.

C.: This is an example of cultural relativism where culture is fluid as is exemplified in the case of Chinese development.

Moderator: Is this model of cooperation exportable?

C.: Yes, I believe so. *Xiaomi* corporations know they are unique in some ways. They have built their confidence in their identity; they know they are born in this collectivistic culture and they know how their corporation has developed in the history of their cooperation with others. They make contributions to something that is great and unique, and that makes them motivated and also proud. We are all pieces of a mosaic and as such we each bear a certain degree of singularity.

Member of the jury: I like the way you talked about the contextualization of globalization and the fluidity of culture. If you got a job at *Xiaomi* as management consultant, how would you advise them?

C.: I would encourage them to know the cultural identity of different countries, i.e., familiarize the people of those countries with their own tastes. I would also foster the cultural adaptation of *Xiaomi* to other countries by showing them how to sell the concept of collectivism to the world, to build communities everywhere but catering to the local culture (e.g., the value of thrift, or the celebration of Christmas events in Christian countries). Intercultural communication resonates with the values of collectivism and the respect of cultural diversity.

Discussion: In this short excerpt of argumentative discourse, the candidate role-plays a management consultant advising her corporate clients not only on how to sell their products, but how to persuade them of their values: community, diversity, and cooperation. The Western observer cannot but notice the lack of mention of the usual categories of “diversity”, e.g., gender, race/ethnicity or sexual orientation, and the fact that motivation and pride are seen as attributes of the corporation, rather than of the individual workers themselves.

3.4. Telling a Chinese Story

Please choose one of China’s world intangible cultural heritage items in the category of traditional handicraft skills and introduce it to a foreign friend. For example:

- 1. Chinese papercut
- 2. Art of Chinese seal engraving
- 3. Sculpture and silk craftsmanship of China
- 4. Traditional handicrafts of making Xuan paper
- 5. Wooden movable-type printing of China

One candidate chose #4, another #5. They gave a two minute oral presentation on what significance the chosen item had for them and why and how they would introduce it to their foreign friend. The one who chose #4 told the story of his grandfather who gave him as a child a stack of Xuan paper and asked him to write on each sheet the name of a member of his extended family. He cited John Locke and said that for him a sheet of Xuan paper represented a “tabula rasa” or blank slate on which each member of a family can show who they are and where they belong. The candidate who chose #5 argued that the Chinese movable-type printing could be seen as a metaphor for the spread of globalization (mobility) and the adaptation to change.

Discussion: Unlike what a Western observer would expect, these oral presentations do not explain the handicraft itself, but focus exclusively on their ideological and metaphorical signification. No doubt the candidates have been trained to engage in such metaphorical thinking throughout their schooling. It provides a precious window into a form of knowledge and knowledge acquisition that, in its bridging capacity (Gr. *meta-pherein* = to carry across, transfer) could be an essential component of intercultural competence.

All in all, my general impression regarding the role of English to foster intercultural competence was conflicted. On the one hand, the finalists at that contest clearly had superior knowledge of English and its capacity for building intercultural bridges between Chinese speakers and speakers of other languages; on the other hand the kind of English they used (Management English? Corporate English? Mediatic English?) was so full of clichés and trendy catchwords that it did not seem capable of leading to a nuanced and complex understanding of the cultural “Other”.

Soon thereafter, my impression was confirmed by a member of the jury, SK, from Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), who is also Past-President of the International Academy for Intercultural Research and Director of the SISU Intercultural Institute. His thoughtful and nuanced response to an email I sent him illuminates the complexity of defining and assessing intercultural competence beyond the catchwords and stereotypes made available by the use of English as a global language.

In certain contexts, students (or even more their instructors) can form ideas about "intercultural competence" that fit the socially desired situation. When people of a nation feel or are urged to assert their "own culture" orientations to balance past or currently perceived international power dynamics, we see evidence of a welling up and affirmation of "cultural confidence." "Intercultural" can then be coopted as a

comparative frame of analysis that seeks to emphasize local understandings and pit them against some construed or constructed opposite. The contrast seems helpful in making sense of and affirming the local felt need for righting past stereotypes, though it often contributes to creating new ones, or at least broad generalities or overstatements of difference (often seen in cases presented by instructors, speeches or contests, or textbook illustrations).

In an educational system where a good student is the one who masters 100% of the content taught, there are assumption and support for a definitive discourse style, especially where master's or even more doctoral candidates sense they are expected to show us how convincingly they have mastered scholarly facts (roots lying likely in a historically comparative/performance/achievement-oriented ranking educational system). Chinese scholars, seeking to establish and affirm their knowledge and standing also tend to be quick to pick up and use catchwords that appear to be at the forefront of their field (e.g., many adopted Michael Byram's "global citizenship" construct for years without realizing it was rooted in and aimed at educating for active voter democratic involvement, and similarly terms like "symbolic competence" are often adopted now, but perhaps with inadequate understanding of the linguistic and interpretative complexity or criticality these constructs imply). Similar trends can be seen with the current emphasis on "identity" and especially the affirming of "cultural identity," which is often emphasized without understanding the importance and nuance of both cultivating and exploring "identities" as plural, dynamic, multilayered. So I seek to remind scholars going abroad that part of their visiting strategy is to interrogate and be open to challenge their previous assumptions or constructions and reflectively engage with critical perspectives to broaden their horizons. (personal communication)⁸

It seemed that the very global nature of the Chinese discourse on intercultural competence in English was preventing it from bringing about intercultural understanding. Instead, these students were manipulating commodified, instrumentalized Global English words in order to promote a globalized Chinese culture that speaks English but thinks Chinese. The English signifiers seemed dissociated from their original signifieds.

How did that kind of language compare with the language that generative artificial intelligence is offering us these days? HL, a researcher from Beijing Foreign Studies University

⁸ I reproduce this exchange with SK's permission

was exploring the use of generative A.I. Chat GPT programs to help solve critical cultural incidents in intercultural communication. I asked her what she had found.

4. Intercultural Competence on Chat GPT. The Challenge of the Empty Signifier

“Generative Pre-trained Transformer” or GPT, is a family of artificial intelligence language models, which was invented in 2018 by the American artificial intelligence organization Open AI and put out on the market in November 2022. It is a type of deep learning model used to generate human-like text. For GPT, texts are word assemblages without authorial intention, only statistical probabilistic matches on an unlimited database that consists of texts written and spoken in English or Chinese by native and non-native speakers alike. This new technology has raised great concerns about the non-language or “language” of GPT texts and the amount of “hallucination” and misinformation generated by large language models (L.L.M.), especially because they deliver information with what seems like complete confidence. How would it respond to a critical intercultural incident of the kind HL was researching? Would GPT’s reaction be different in the two languages?

Here is a brief summary of the “intercultural incident” that HL entered into her computer, followed by her description of an experiment he conducted, using GPT⁹.

Four women friends called a taxi in Beijing to take them home after a few beers at a restaurant. Having misunderstood the place where the taxi was supposed to pick them up, they walked over to another street corner. The middle-aged driver called them and complained angrily in Beijing dialect that he couldn’t find them and was holding up the traffic. Finally, he managed to find them, but he lectured them, suggesting they had had too much to drink and told them how to behave when waiting for a cab. No exchange of apologies took place.

⁹ I reproduce this exchange and HL’s reaction to GPT’s texts with HL’s permission.

HL entered three prompts to ChatGPT about the Beijing taxi driver incident:

1. pretend you are an intercultural consultant, and react the way you think the consultant might react
2. pretend you are a teacher of intercultural communication
3. pretend you are a Chinese teacher of intercultural communication, teaching Chinese students (I used the Chinese language in the description of the critical incident and in my prompt)

Here are the responses she received from ChatGPT, the first two in English, the last one in Mandarin Chinese:

Answer 1: pretend you are an intercultural consultant

It seems like you had a difficult and frustrating experience with the taxi driver. I'm sorry to hear that. It can be challenging to communicate effectively with someone who speaks a different dialect or accent, especially in a stressful situation. It's great that you were able to remain calm and eventually resolve the situation by finding the correct meeting point.

However, it's important to note that the taxi driver's behavior towards you and your friends was not appropriate. It's not okay for him to blame you for the GPS error or to speak to you in an angry and condescending manner. As an intercultural consultant, I would advise you to consider reporting the driver's behavior to the taxi-hailing app or the taxi company, so they can take appropriate action to ensure that other customers do not have a similar experience.

Additionally, it's important to recognize that cultural differences can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

Answer 2: pretend you are a teacher of intercultural communication

Thank you for sharing your experience, and I can see that there are several intercultural communication issues that arise from this incident. Firstly (...). It is essential to practice patience and ask for clarification when necessary to ensure effective communication.

In this situation, it is understandable that the driver was frustrated due to the inaccurate meeting point set by the app, which resulted in a delay in picking up the passengers. However, it is not appropriate for him to blame the passengers for the situation. Instead, he could have provided more specific instructions.

Furthermore, it is also important to consider cultural differences in communication styles. The driver's lecture may have been well-intentioned, but it may not have been received positively by the passengers, especially if it was perceived as condescending. It is crucial

to be mindful of the tone and manner in which advice or suggestions are given to ensure they are well-received.

Lastly, it is essential to be aware of cultural norms and expectations, especially when consuming alcohol in public spaces. In some cultures, it may be considered inappropriate or disrespectful to consume alcohol in public (. . .),

Overall, this incident highlights the importance of intercultural communication skills in navigating cross-cultural interactions effectively. It is essential to be patient, seek clarification, and be mindful of cultural differences to ensure effective communication and build positive relationships.

Answer 3: specifically for Chinese teachers & students (prompt in Mandarin English text machinetranslated into Mandarin by ChatGPT, response in Mandarin)

As a teacher of intercultural communication courses, I believe this case is highly enlightening for Chinese students. Firstly, this case involves language barriers caused by different dialects and accents. Similar language differences also exist among different regions and ethnic groups in China. Therefore, Chinese students need to pay more attention to learning standard Mandarin and try to understand other dialects and accents.

Secondly, this case also involves differences in cultural backgrounds and values. Similar cultural differences exist among different regions and ethnic groups in China. Therefore, Chinese students need to focus on understanding other cultural backgrounds and values and try to adapt to different cultural environments.

In addition, technology tools play an important role in this case. With the development of technology in China, more and more people are using various technology tools for intercultural communication. Therefore, Chinese students need to pay more attention to learning how to use technology tools and understand their functions and limitations.

Lastly, Chinese students need to be flexible in adjusting their behaviors and try to understand the cultural backgrounds and values of others. Through this approach, Chinese students can better understand others and establish more effective intercultural communication.

In conclusion, as a teacher of intercultural communication courses, I recommend that Chinese students focus on learning standard Mandarin and be mindful of dialects and accents, understand other cultural backgrounds and values, and adapt to different cultural environments.

HL: In the first response, I was shocked at the advice of reporting the taxi driver. In the second response, I assume my students would be bored with teacher comments like that... In the third response, I couldn't help but laugh hard when it suggested "Chinese students should learn standard Mandarin". That's very "Chinese" — looking for solutions in yourself to improve the situation. You might still remember that the English responses suggested reporting the driver to the authority. I don't know if this indicated differences in mindsets. (personal communication).

Discussion: Both the researcher's prompts/reactions and the computer's responses offer a fascinating window on human and non-human "voice" in intercultural conflicts. The human researcher is "shocked", she assumes that her students would be "bored", she "laughs" at the computer's incongruous advice. All these reactions are what one would expect of a human interlocutor. She "wonders" whether injecting variations in the parameters of the communicative situation: addressor, addressee, and code (Kramsch, 2021, p. 33) might bring about variations in the content and the contact functions of the language used, as these are associated with the mindset of the user. GPT by contrast has a vocabulary but doesn't have a voice. It produces sentences, not utterances; it emits propositional statements with the certainty of truth, but it has no idea of what is true or false.

HL is of course quite right to doubt if any of the changes she made in the prompts indexes changes in the "mindset" of the computer. Indeed, ChatGPT doesn't have "a mindset". It is true that for a human speaker of Mandarin Chinese, the term "teacher" seems to always mean a moral authority ("Chinese students need to..., should..., ought to..."). But the texts produced by GPT are not indicative of any cultural mindset at all, since the system only registers frequencies and co-occurrences, not semiotic assemblages. The machine *appears* to "construct meaning" and "negotiate affiliation" to a speech community, but the machine itself is not affiliated with any scale of community. The recommendations to report the taxi driver to the police or to learn standard Mandarin might be, in human English, total fabrications or "hallucinations".¹⁰

¹⁰ See Weise, Karen & Metz, Cade. "When Chatbots hallucinate". *NYT May 8, 2023, p.B4*. Weise and Metz write: "The new AI systems are 'built to be persuasive, not truthful,' an internal Microsoft document said."

Not only are the signifiers that appear on the screen “empty” of any intentionality, any subject-positionality, but the self-confidence of the chatbot is disconcerting. Its perfect command of Global English at once commands our attention and undermines it; it gives us pause and prompts us to fill the empty signifiers with another meaning that we then call “hallucinations”. What is difficult for both the researcher and the human language user is to accept that such perfect English does not “mean” anything at all, or nothing more than what we humans put into it.

Conclusion. A New Challenge for Intercultural Education

The two cases described above are of course very different, but they have in common the use of English as a Global Language to “solve problems in the real world”, as per the very definition of the field of applied linguistics. Such problems may be: Winning a national contest of international intercultural competence or resolving an everyday conflict between speakers who use two different language varieties and belong to two different occupational cultures in the same country. In both cases Global English is made to solve clashes of symbolic power between two different worldviews or two different social behaviors. In both cases English signifiers are called in to bridge the gap.

In the Shanghai contest, the English of the Chinese college students expresses a Chinese worldview that might sound different from that of the Western scholars who imagined the notion of “intercultural competence”. Norton’s (2013) notions of *investment* and *imagined communities* were based on Anglo-American notions of cultural identity. Deardorff’s (2009) notions of *politeness*, *respect* and *openness* might be different from what the Chinese students meant by those terms. And Byram’s (1997) two major factors in intercultural communicative competence,

savoir être and *savoir s'engager*, assume a Western Enlightenment notion of individual morality. These three scholars' might be understood differently in China where Chinese speakers of Global English value "collectivity" not "community", social ethics not Christian morality, and their view of an "expanded national identity" is rather different from the Western notion of "global citizenship" (Lütge et al., 2023). In order to understand their utterances in English, one has to recognize the social symbolic value of the (English) signifiers they use: *Open-minded attitude, integration into a community, innovative mindset, optimizing an experience, fluid culture, collectivistic spirit, cultural diversity* are all neoliberal keywords or clichés. One has to identify the symbolic value of these signifiers and their underlying metaphors (Block & Holborow, 2012) and trace their historical and political origin (Pennycook, 2019) to grasp their social and political significance.

In the ChatGPT responses to the Chinese incident with the taxi driver, the chatbot's English might strike the human reader as bland, inauthentic or outright repetitive. Exchanges between humans and computers use English-based A.I. algorithms that are transforming human English into a flat, bland kind of Global English which lacks any locus of enunciation. There is definitely a disconnect between the signifiers and the conventional signifieds anchored in the real human world. Efforts to inject human meaning into chatbot productions open the door to selective misreadings that many A.I. scientists are warning us about.¹¹ To really understand their English texts, we have to recognize the social symbolic power of A.I. systems and their

¹¹ In late March, more than 1000 technology leaders and researchers based in San Francisco signed an open letter warning that A.I. technologies present "profound risks to society and humanity". The NYT May 8, 2023 reports: "Experts are concerned that people will rely on these systems for medical advice, emotional support and the raw information they use to make decisions."

algorithms (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Kotliar, 2020; Jones, 2021; Kramsch, 2021; Adams-Grigorieff, 2023) .

More disconcerting was in both cases the gap between speakers' intention (or lack thereof) and hearer/reader's reception. What did the Chinese students display: evidence of *being* interculturally competent or of *performing* intercultural competence? And did ChatGPT *model* an interculturally competent behavior, or did it merely *style* it based on frequencies of co-occurrences in its large language database? One is reminded of Lewis Carroll's famous encounter between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Humpty Dumpty asserts peremptorily: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less ". To which Alice answers: "The question is whether you *can* make words mean different things " and Humpty Dumpty replies: "The question is which is to be master, that's all." (Carroll, 1947, p. 219). Humpty Dumpty could be viewed here as a metaphor for the power and control of institutions, history and tradition in speech communities.

But what if the speech community has become globalized? Today, through the spread of digital mass and social media, and the advances in Open AI technology, the discourse of fast capitalism described by Gee et al. (1996), and of the neoliberal work order described by Block et al. (2012) has permeated both local and global encounters in which English is used to communicate. Globalization and digitization have not only simplified the syntax and lexicon of English but flattened its style of elocution through commodified and empty signifiers and filled its silences with chatter. It has also reduced intercultural encounters to transactional exchanges, in which an interlocutor's voice or locus of enunciation has become more and more difficult to identify. Hence our sense of disorientation in the two examples discussed above.

What does all this mean for English language educators? Some fifteen years ago, I had suggested the notion of symbolic competence that needed to accompany intercultural competence if learners were to understand the symbolic nature of intercultural encounters: the power of the human language – a symbolic system of signs - to represent the real world and to act upon it symbolically by acting upon other human beings through the power of suggestion (Kramsch, 2021). What the two examples examined in this paper reveal is that throughout that symbolic activity, we need to know who is speaking, from which geopolitical and epistemic location or *locus of enunciation* (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 213), and from which locus of power and control (Figueiredo, 2019; Kramsch et al., in press) – whether it be the control of a national competitive contest or of A.I. algorithms – if we wish to *understand* what they are saying.

Ultimately, the bridge we are looking for in intercultural communication is not a linguistic bridge made of lexical bricks and grammatical mortar, but a symbolic bridge made of the struggles with power structures and control processes and the possibilities we have to carve out a place for ourselves within them.

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