Intercultural competence and the promise of understanding

Setting the scene

Notwithstanding the contribution of postcolonial notions of subjectivity that emphasise the hybrid nature of a third space (Bhabba, 1994), the category of culture remains at the centre of intercultural communication theory. I agree with both Dervin (2011) and Holliday (2011) in pointing not only to essentialist intercultural communication theory with its rigid attribution of cultural identity along national lines (e.g. Hofstede and Hofstede, 2004), but also to neo-essentialist uses of culture, particularly in the field of intercultural foreign language education. In fact, Cole and Meadows (2013) write of an 'essentialist trap', highlighting a paradox of intercultural communication: although there is a growing awareness of the dangers of essentialism, culture and language are still considered discrete entities, a fact that Holliday (2011) defines in terms of methodological nationalism and which derives from the association between learning a foreign language and a foreign culture. Thus, neo-essentialism describes the situation ''*where educators recognise the limits of essentialism but nevertheless reinforce it''* (Cole and Meadows, 2013, p.30). Taking an anti-essentialist stance, I focus on the first term of the word intercultural, the 'inter', to argue in favour of a shift from culture to the dynamic process of communication, in order to highlight the dialogic character of interaction and its unpredictability.

In regard to the notion of competence, Byram argues that academic research has been preoccupied primarily with the necessities of international trade, leaving under-theorised the aspect relating to the creation of a framework for dialogue that will provide '*a better understanding of human beings and their potential*' (2011, p.20). In this sense, Byram delineates a research agenda for intercultural competence based on the problematisation and critique of current theory, in order to provide the conceptual work needed before the collection of empirical data. This conceptual work, including philosophical inquiry, is not limited to the description of a phenomenon but postulates '*the possible forms it might take*' and

evaluates *'the effects these might have'* (2011, p.33). In this particular context philosophical inquiry can be employed to analyse the role of the notion of competence in the intercultural field,

> Philosophical inquiry is also necessary for the analysis of the concept of 'competence' which has easily become attached to the notion of the intercultural (Ibid.)

In line with this critique, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach in the form of a philosophical investigation into the epistemological assumptions of the concept of competence and the ethical implications for intercultural dialogue. From this perspective, I critique the epistemological underpinnings of the notion of intercultural competence as it is conceptualised in two frameworks that are paradigmatic of current thinking in intercultural research: the pyramid model (Deardorff, 2006, 2009) and the ICOPROMO project (Glaser, Guilherme et al, 2007).

First, I illustrate the notion of tolerance as it is conceptualised by Derrida in relation to the concept of hospitality, and I propose a guiding principle for intercultural communication based on the idea of deferred understanding, meaning the acceptance of risk taking and incompleteness in communication. Following from this, I introduce the notion of subjectivity as it is formulated by Levinas (1998, 2006), which provides an account of the relationship between self and other that informs a dialogic, ethical and open-ended understanding of communication in the form of presence to one another as corporeal, embodied subjects who co-construct meanings. In the light of this philosophical discussion, I critique the pyramid model of competence and the ICOPROMO project. Finally, I sketch an alternative understanding of competence that relies on a dialogic idea of communication closely aligned to a Levinasian interpretation of the ethical, which is connected to the experiential sphere and the bodily aspects of lived human subjectivity.

The promise of understanding

Vandenabeele (2003) warns against the danger of creating another 'grand narrative' (Lyotard, 1984) of intercultural communication, highlighting the danger of universalising an ideal of understanding and communicative transparency based on the value of unambiguous information (Block and Cameron, 2002) and on the ideas of tolerance and understanding from the hegemonic perspective of a dominant cultural position (Holliday, 2011). This 'grand narrative' of efficiency in communicating across cultures is evident in formulations of intercultural competence and intercultural training programs that focus on the acquisition of communicative skills to deal effectively with the other (e.g. Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Spencer-Oatey and Standler, 2009).

This ideal of fulfilment and completeness in communication is ascribed by Derrida (1974, 1984, 1997) to a metaphysics of presence. In other words, Western metaphysical tradition refers to an original signified that encloses truth within a system of binary oppositions, in which one term is identified with full presence-or truth, and the other term, the negative, with the loss of presence (Norris, 1982; Derrida, 1997; Bradley, 2008). As MacDonald and O'Regan (2012) argue, an instance of this metaphysics of presence in intercultural communication theory is reflected in the opposition between tolerance and intolerance: the positive value of tolerance of the other, achieved through intercultural understanding, is opposed to the negative value of intolerance and refusal of the 'cultural other'. Thus, according to this metaphysics of presence, on the one side intercultural theory embraces and celebrates cultural difference, while on the other it aims for a final moment of reconciliation of all differences in the unity of universal tolerance.

In contrast to this ideal of universal tolerance and of a final unity of understanding, I refer to the notions of promise, hospitality and deferred understanding which recur throughout Derrida's philosophical investigations. The promise is described in the notion of a 'disjointed' temporality that is irreducible to presence (Derrida, 1994; Wortham, 2010), meaning that there is an element that remains irreducible

to the system of binary oppositions of Western metaphysics, which is described by Derrida in terms of a promise of hospitality without reserve. This idea of hospitality is better illustrated through Derrida's deconstruction of the notion of tolerance.

Derrida contrasts the idea of tolerance, intended in terms of *'condescending concession'*, and *'a form of charity'* (Borradori, 2003, p.127), to that of unconditional hospitality. The inherent contradiction in the notion of tolerance is expressed with the word hostipitality: the word hospitality carries within itself its own contradiction, in the word host-hostility,

> The welcomed guest (hôte) is a stranger treated as a friend or ally, as opposed to the stranger treated as an enemy (friend/enemy, hospitality/hostility).

This means that the welcome conferred upon a guest is dependent on the goodwill of the host, and that the welcome can be withdrawn, turning into hostility, if the rules imposed to the guest are not observed. These rules are defined by Derrida as the law of the household,

> Where it is precisely the *patron* of the house-he who receives, who is master in his house, in his household, in his state, in his nation, in his city, in his town, who remains master in his house- who defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome; where consequently there can be no unconditional welcome, no unconditional passage through the door (Derrida, 2006, p. 210).

In fact, the exercise of tolerance is dependent on a conditional welcome, which can be withdrawn to exclude the welcomed. Although unconditional hospitality is in itself impossible, according to Derrida it represents nevertheless the condition of the political and the juridical, because it provides an idea of perfectibility guiding the rules governing conditional hospitality. In other words, unconditional hospitality is experienced in the tension between the act and its realization.

In this sense, Derrida's deconstruction of the word hospitality resonates with the distinction that I propose here in relation to intercultural communication theory between two forms of understanding, one intended in terms of a promise of final reconciliation and universal tolerance, and the other in terms of a promise of deferred understanding which is constantly renewed in the practice of communication and thus remains open-ended. This distinction addresses the problematic nature of the notion of tolerance of the cultural practices of the other employed in intercultural theory, which leaves the conceptualisation of the relationship self/other open to this internal contradiction highlighted by Derrida and which I analyse next in reference to Levinasian ethics.

Levinas: the vulnerability of the subject

In the context of intercultural theory an understanding of the role of the other in shaping interaction is a crucial determinant in the task of redefining an idea of competence that is based on the interdependence of self and other. In this context, I contrast the Kantian presuppositions of current notions of intercultural competence with the concept of Levinasian heteronomy intended in terms of hospitality without reserve and deferred understanding.

In Kantian autonomy, persons are ends in themselves in virtue of their rationality and thus each person is a moral legislator, according to the dictates of the moral imperative guided by reason (Kant, 1983). This conception of the self as moral legislator can be observed in the notion of tolerance that underpins intercultural competence. According to this ethics of autonomy, the competent intercultural speaker is able to determine in advance the outcome of communication through the acquisition of communicative tools that are used responsibly by the moral agent in interaction with a cultural other, who is the recipient of this act (Ferri, 2014). In contrast to this understanding of ethical autonomy, an appreciation of Levinasian ethics suggests a different approach to intercultural communication, because the position of the moral agent as legislator is destabilised by the presence of the other.

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The notion of the face (Levinas, 1998, 2006) conveys the ethical effect of an encounter in which the concrete face of the other reveals the vulnerability of existence, indicating the proximity and corporeality of the other person facing the self. In the context of intercultural theory, I propose a reading of the notion of the face of the other that emphasises the materiality of the embodied other facing the self (Sparrow, 2013). As an illustration of this reading, in the following quote Levinas explains that, as opposed to ontological knowledge of the other, the ethical relation is established in the presence of self and other in their materiality, as embodied beings,

> I do not know if one can speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the colour of his eyes! When one observes the colour of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that (Levinas, 1985, pp.85-86).

Understood in this way, '*the whole human body is in this sense more or less face*' (p.99). Thus, obligation towards the other is not the result of a formal or procedural universalization of maxims, because ethics is lived in the corporeal obligation that originates from the immanent, here and now, meeting with the other (Critchley, 1999). Here, I understand that in the presence of another being we are compelled to respond, although in relation to the phrase '*straightaway ethical'* employed by Levinas, I contend that it does not imply necessarily a conception of '*goodness*' as it is commonly used in reference to a moral judgment, rather it expresses the practical engagement established with an other in the praxis of everydayness and communication, which also harbours the possibility of hostility, fear and even violence. Understood in this sense, ethical engagement assumes a different connotation due to the acknowledgment of the possibility of miscommunication,

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misunderstanding and failure to establish dialogue, which is entailed in a conception of intercultural communication that recognises the dimension of risk taking and open ended engagement between self and other.

Intercultural competence and individual autonomy

Following from the theoretical discussion relating to the idea of hospitality and to the ethical status of the self in the encounter with the other, in this section I focus on the critique of two models of competence. These two models illustrate the Kantian ideal of an autonomous and self-sufficient self who is in control of the interaction and is unaffected by the role played by the other in communication. In particular, I draw attention to an epistemological issue, which I identify in the passage from a monocultural self to inter-relationality that is postulated in both the pyramid model and the ICOPROMO project as a result of the acquisition of skills and intercultural competences.

Whereas the notion of a monocultural identity is unproblematised in both frameworks, I adopt a critical stance in relation to the idea of an idealised self as expression of a national culture and of a national language, which indicates an essentialist orientation according to which cultures are clearly defined entities delimited by national boundaries. From this perspective, Street (1993) attributes essentialism to the use of nominalisation imported from scientific discourse, which turns culture into a natural entity that determines individual behaviour. To this use of the notion of culture, Street opposes the idea of culture as a verb, describing meanings as contingent and unstable, constantly negotiated in everyday life and culture as a discursive construction built in interaction. Similarly, Coupland (2007) refers to the term styling to indicate culture as the shaping of social meanings through the use of semiotic resources.

To the critique of monocultural identity as expression of an essentialist conception of culture, I add another dimension relating to ethics. As the contrast between Kantian autonomy and Levinasian heteronomy suggests, the notion of

monoculturality is rooted in the ideal of a self-sufficient and self-governing individual reflected in the conception of ethical autonomy of Western liberal tradition. In the critical reading of the two models of competence conducted in this section I aim to tease out this particular aspect relating to ethical autonomy and I argue for a different conceptualisation of the relation between self and other based on dialogism.

The Pyramid model and the ICOPROMO project

The notion of competence delineated by Deardorff (2006, 2009) aims to provide a framework to guide intercultural dialogue according to a pyramid model in which the main four elements are ordered hierarchically: attitudes, skills, knowledge, internal and external outcomes. These elements can be applied to a variety of contexts to guide and assess the development of intercultural competence. In this model, intercultural competence is defined in terms of effectiveness in communication. The final outcome of the process of acquisition of competences allows the self to move from the personal level, represented by attitudes, to an inter-personal and interactive level. This conclusion, however, poses an issue. Although the acquisition of the required attitudes leads to appropriate cultural behaviours in intercultural situations, the role of the other in shaping competence is neglected in the emphasis placed on skills and measurable, realistic outcomes. As a consequence, what Deardorff interprets as inter-relationality stands for a change in behaviour generating from a static notion of culture occurring after the acquisition of competences, rather than through a process of transformation originating from the 'inter', the processual act of interaction.

As in Deardorff's pyramid model, responding to the necessities of global trade represents a major preoccupation in the ICOPROMO model (Glaser, Guilherme et al, 2007). However, the ICOPROMO project combines the preoccupation with professional development in competitive markets and the idea of transformation. Indeed, this model of competence is defined '*transformational*' because,

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> it articulates the journey the individual undergoes when becoming aware of intercultural challenges as a result of his/her mobility or that of others with whom he/she must communicate effectively (p.15).

Similarly to Deardorff's model, this training program is targeted at educators and facilitators working with undergraduate, graduate students and professionals who need to develop language and cultural awareness in order to interact effectively in intercultural situations. The transformational journey of the individual towards the acquisition of competences is represented by a traffic light in which the individual is initially positioned on the red light prior to the development of intercultural skills, moving to the amber and green lights once he/she becomes able to interact effectively with cultural difference. The theoretical premise of this journey is individuated by the authors in the necessities presented by the '*new world order*', meaning the global flows of trade and communication developed after WW2, which in their account has exposed individuals to a higher intensity of cultural difference and consequently to challenges that are linguistic, cultural and emotional. Crucially, the authors define the individual in terms of a '*mono-cultural identity'* (p.16), and as a consequence the main aim of the training programme is to cause an attitudinal change towards the other, with the ability to dispel stereotypes about '*members of a foreign culture'* (Ibid.).

As mentioned above, the transformational aims of the ICOPROMO model are based on the notion of a 'new world order' that poses the challenge of being able to cope when confronted with cultural difference. The development of IC competence, in order to bring about attitudinal and behavioural changes, requires: awareness of the self and the other, communication across cultures, the acquisition of cultural knowledge, sense-making, perspective-taking, relationship building and the ability to assume social responsibility. This complex of skills results in intercultural mobility, '*the ability to interact effectively in intercultural professional contexts'* (p.17). The theoretical underpinning of this transformational model resides in a conception of the self based on field theory (Lewin, 1935), which studies behaviour as the interaction between personality and

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environmental pressures. Thus, training is designed with the scope to influence behaviour through an intervention that is tailored to the needs of individuals and the particular challenges that they are facing.

In more detail, the development of competence begins with the awareness of self and other, particularly dealing with culture shock or '*cultural fatigue*' (Glaser, Guilherme et al, 2007, p.31). This aspect relating to culture shock as a consequence of cultural difference is employed to justify the notion that communication across cultures leads to miscommunication and misunderstanding and the necessity to acquire both language awareness and the acquisition of specific cultural knowledge. The fact of being exposed to new information from a different culture leads in its turn to the necessity to develop the ability of sense-making, in the form of interpreting and making meaning, as well as the skill of '*identifying/perceiving and understanding prevalent values, beliefs and norms in a situation*' (p.35). Perspective-taking allows the individual to look at reality from different viewpoints, and to develop empathy and tolerance, flexibility and the ability to decentre. At this stage, the result of effective intercultural communication is represented by intercultural mobility. However, according to the authors this mobility needs to be contextualised within a broader project of democratic citizenship, which promotes intercultural interaction and dialogue in complex societies and emerging communities created by intercultural contact.

The problematisation of Deardorff's model of competence and the ICOPROMO project highlights a number of issues that relate to their epistemological assumptions. Here I illustrate the sequence of the acquisition of competences that is employed in both models:

Motivation to become interculturally competent	Skills	Outcomes
Global trade Need to become competitive Response to culture shock	To acquire knowledge of another culture and the patterns of behaviour associated with it To relativise and dispel stereotypes attributed to the cultural other	Effectiveness Cultural sensitivity Tolerance Responsibility Transformation

In both frameworks the motivation to interact in intercultural contexts stems from the necessities of global trade, which require that the problem of cultural difference is fixed through the acquisition of skills and the framing of the other in cultural terms.The emphasis on consciousness and on a functional, instrumental understanding of communication presents the transformation of the self into a responsible, intercultural being as a process beginning in a fully bounded individual who acquires the necessary competences to deal with the initial cultural shock that occurs as a consequence of the encounter with another culture. Following the acquisition of competence the individual is then able to deal effectively and sensitively towards the cultural other.

From this perspective, although the dimension of critical intercultural citizenship developed by Guilherme (2002) is included in the ICOPROMO project, and a critical approach to a static vision of culture is advocated in Deardorff's model, the practical necessity to become competitive in the global market is taken as the principal element that guides the epistemological assumptions underpinning both frameworks, which relate to the conception of the self as an autonomous being. This stance is illustrated by Deardorff in reference to intercultural learning and intercultural courses in further education as a means to equip students for a more global and interdependent world,

> How can we prepare our students to comprehend the multitude of countries and cultures that may have an impact on their lives and careers? More broadly, what knowledge, skills, and attitudes do our students need if they are to be successful in the twenty-first century? (…) To this end, service learning and education abroad

become two mechanisms by which students' intercultural competence can be further developed, leading to students' transformation (Deardoff, 2011, pp.69-70).

The role of global trade is acknowledged as the initiating force behind the development of intercultural training programmes and creates what Holliday (2011) defines in terms of a reification of intercultural training and the creation of a sealable product, marketed as intercultural competence. This reification presents the intercultural process as the meeting of separate cultural entities, while the intercultural trainer facilitates and provides the tools to help navigate and interpret behaviour as expression of cultural difference. The starting point in this process is represented by the notion of culture shock, or cultural fatigue, which is assumed to initiate the transformational process that changes the individual from monocultural to an interculturally competent entity.

The idea of culture shock derives from anthropology and the four stages of adaptation identified by Oberg (1960), beginning with the honeymoon stage during initial contact with a different culture, followed by negative feelings of anxiety, rejection, anger and frustration, ending with adjustment and finally adaption to the new culture. This concept of culture shock has been widely criticised, although it has become embedded in popular consciousness and it is widely used to designate the shock upon encountering an 'exotic' culture (Kuppens and Mast, 2012). In relation to the role of culture shock in both models of competence discussed in this research, I argue that what is described as the encounter with a reality that is incomprehensible and alien represents a more complex phenomenon that comprises a series of factors that neo-essentialist accounts of culture, of which the two models of competence are paradigmatic, fail to acknowledge.

In this sense, what is described in terms of culture shock hides the complexity of factors that influence communication in intercultural encounters, so that miscommunication due to lack of sociolinguistic competence in the use of a

dominant language, low socio-economic status, class and power imbalance are attributed to cultural difference. Therefore, when culture becomes the principal explanatory category to understand intercultural communication, the notion of competence is presented as a fix, a set of tools that the individual can utilise to become tolerant and understanding of other cultural beings in the context of a globalised neo-liberal market, which I understand in terms of the deterritorialised flows of global trade illustrated in Hardt and Negri (2000), characterised by competitiveness and the necessity to interact effectively. Crucially, this focus on cultural difference prevalent in intercultural training, based on the notion of cultural shock experienced by the individual, leaves unaccounted for this aspect of globalisation relating to power and cultural capital, or global flows of '*interested knowledge, hegemonic power, and cultural capital*' (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p.1). To this end, I suggest to focus on two aspects that have been neglected in both models of competence, and that relate to the complex and dynamic relation between self and other, introducing the dialogic perspective that I discuss in the next section.

The first aspect is represented by hegemonic cultural representations of the other. This aspect is underpinned by an essentialist attitude to culture, which is taken at face value as a set of beliefs held by a particular group that influences behaviour. In this essentialist conception of culture, the role performed by the other in interaction is limited to that of representing a cultural being. Holliday (2011) ascribes this essentialism to the dichotomy established between a Western self and a marginalised other. This dichotomy creates an organization of knowledge in which perceived Western and non-Western characteristics are distributed along a dichotomous axis: industrial-rural, developed-underdeveloped, secular-religious, modern-retrogade, individualistic-collectivistic. Organised along these binary terms, essentialism creates hegemonic cultural discourses according to which non-Western societies become a counterpoint to the West and are viewed as monolithic entities characterised by rigid cultural values (Hall, 1996; Nair-Venugopal, 2012).

Thus, the neo-essentialist dichotomy between a Western perspective on the one side, and a separate cultural block that includes all non-Western cultures on the other, reflects the relation proposed by Holliday (2011) between the dominant, hegemonic discourses of the West and the process of othering towards peripheral discourses emanating from non-Western perspectives. In this process, hegemonic discourses position their own production of knowledge in scientific terms, whilst alternative discourses are labelled as cultural products of the 'other'. As such, these peripheral and non-Western perspectives are invoked by Deardorff from a neo-essentialist position in the name of the ideal of universal tolerance of the other, meaning that the other is reduced to represent a cultural standpoint.

The second aspect relates to the emphasis on appropriateness, effectiveness and on the instrumental needs of the self in guiding communication, which underplays the influence of the context of interaction. Koole and ten Thije (2001) argue that the focus on cultural difference in the analysis of communication in intercultural contexts leads researchers to overlook other characteristics of discourse, such as power relations between dominant and non-dominant groups, resulting in analytical stereotyping and overgeneralizations. Thus, the a priori reliance on cultural difference in the analysis of intercultural interactions highlighted by Blommaert (1991) can be contrasted to other approaches that emphasise power relations and the societal institutions within which the interactions take place, through a situational and discursive approach (e.g. Gumperz, 1982; Scollon and Scollon, 1995; Koole and ten Thije, 2001). According to interactional sociolinguistics, the influence of culture is often inflated in determining behaviour and communication while other factors are ignored, such as socio-economic inequality in multiligual contexs. In the context of intercultural communication, the idea of cultural difference in communication is thus used in guiding communicative exchanges in elite situations, such as business and management, in which recognition of the other is essentialised:

> Whereas the intercultural object - the Other - is usually pictured as caught in a web of age-old essential and inflexible values and customs, those who have identified the other claim to be free of such determinism (Blommaert, 1998, p.3).

The recognition of the influence of cultural essentialism and of inequality in communication has important repercussions in the conceptualisation of a dialogic understanding of competence that emphasises the provisional and open-ended dimension of interaction. Indeed, the analysis of context offered by research in the field of sociolinguistics provides a starting point from which it is possible to begin to unravel the complexity entailed in communication from an anti-essentialist perspective. Thus, after the critique of the pyramid model and the ICOPROMO project, in the next section I adopt the notion of dialogism in order to reflect on the ethics of communication from the dimension of the 'inter'-of interculturality, meaning the praxis of interaction between self and other.

I suggest that the challenges that emerge in the course of intercultural encounters can be envisioned in terms of an ethics of hospitality and deferred understanding. From this ethical perspective, the complexity of intercultural communication surfaces when the ideals of autonomy and self-sufficiency of the self are destabilised by the embodied presence of the other. What is revealed in this instance is the tension experienced between hospitality as unconditional welcoming of the other and the limitations of cultural tolerance, a situation expressed by Derrida with the aforementioned notion of hostipitality.

Therefore, in rejecting a notion of intercultural communication that relies too excessively on a static and essentialist interpretation of culture, I suggest that intercultural interaction brings to the surface the endeavour, and often the failure, to negotiate meaning that characterises human communication, both inter-and intra-cultural. This existential dimension is rooted in the unpredictability of interaction, when hospitality is tested during the encounter with the other in dialogue. To this end, in order to begin the task of reconceptualising intercultural

competence from the perspective of dialogism, it is crucial to redefine alternative representations of the relationship between self and other that focus on inter-relationality. In the next section I discuss the broad features of Levinasian ethical engagement with the other as a guide for intercultural theory.

Dialogic competence as deferred understanding

Dialogism has been discussed in the context of intercultural theory as an alternative to essentialist positioning of self and other along cultural definitions. Heisey (2011), Orbe (2007) and Xu (2013) invite researchers to include the contradictions, the tensions and the inequalities that are manifested in communication, thus emphasising multiple perspectives and a deeper appreciation of complexity. In this regard I maintain that, in order to allow the emergence of a dialogic moment of communication, dialogue cannot be controlled through the setting of outcomes, but it has to remain open-ended. In other words, in dialogic interactions understanding is deferred in the praxis of engagement between self and other.

For example, Yoshikawa (1987) employs the double swing model based on the idea that communication is an infinite process in the course of which participants undergo a transformation. This idea is based on the Taoist teaching of the *Yin and Yang*, which expresses the notion of the interdependence of self and other at the root of dialogism. If Western rationality is founded on a system of binary oppositions, defined by Derrida in terms of a metaphysics of presence, the Taoist principle of *Yin* and *Yang* incarnates the fundamental contradictory nature of the self and the co-existence of opposites. This idea is accompanied by the concept of *bian* (change), which in Taoism represents the fundamental principle ruling the universe. In other words, the dialectical interaction of the two opposites *Yin* and *Yang* underpins the dynamic nature of the real, characterised by change and transformation (Chen, 2008).

With a similar approach, and according to the Levinasian perspective adopted in this paper, I argue that the ethical encounter opens up a dialogic dimension of communication that is also critical engagement and concern for the concrete other, rather than simple tolerance towards an abstract 'cultural other' (Ferri, 2014). Adopting this perspective, I propose an exploratory illustration of interaction in Levinasian terms, which I suggest contributes to the development of an understanding of competence in terms of dialogism, as opposed to the ideal of ethical autonomy of the two models of competence examined in the previous section.

A crucial aspect in this Levinasian perspective is represented by the interdependence of self and other. This means that the self experiences the ethical after the encounter with the other, as a result of interaction. This ethical character of interaction is revealed when the self is somehow thrown off balance by an unexpected encounter that upsets the cultural parameters employed to categorise the other. Such an experience is the result of an existential disposition that in Phipps's (2007) terms develops when the self is fully immersed in the messiness of intercultural encounters and is open to challenge pre-conceived ideas of culture and identity. As Piller suggests, because context is an emergent and dynamic process which is negotiated by all participants, this 'messiness' of actual interactions demonstrates the limitations of attempts to understand and regulate communication using the category of culture. This means that establishing dialogical relations lived in the immanent *here and now* requires an understanding of the complexity of factors that constitute the context of interaction,

> Paying close attention to actual interactions not only reminds us of the importance of natural language and the complexity of human interactions; it also demonstrates that interactants sometimes simply do not want to understand each other and that misunderstandings arise not only because of linguistic or cultural differences, but also because people fight and argue. Put differently, in interactions there are often simply different interests at stake and interactants may not actually want to understand each other. Intercultural communication research often creates the impression that if we just knew how to overcome our linguistic and cultural differences, we would get on just

> fine with each other and the world would be transformed into a
> paradise on earth (Piller, 2011, p.155).

In this sense, intercultural speakers are able not only to analyse the constraints that influence interaction and the role of language in the communicative exchange, but are also able to recognise and understand the ways in which culture is being enacted and recreated. From this perspective, the concerns relating to the use of the category of culture to explain when something 'goes wrong' in communication are addressed by the straightforward relation with the other described by Levinas, which relates to his notion of responsibility intended as a response to the other that occurs through engagement in dialogue. This notion of responsibility is described by Bakhtin (1986) as the *addressivity* of language, the fact that all interactants are active participants in communication.

The acceptance of the impossibility to reach this ideal of '*a paradise on earth*' (Piller, 2011, p.155), meaning the idea of a promise of understanding in which all conflicting claims are pacified in the name of a higher universal truth, brings about an important dimension of communication between self and other. Accounts of critical awareness (*see* Tomic and Lengel, 1997; Tomic, 2001; Guilherme, 2002) describe the process in which the encounter with the strangeness of another cultural perspective allows the self to reflect critically on his/her own cultural standpoint and to discover the other within oneself. From this perspective, the self understands the cultural differences that guide the behaviour of the other, is able to negotiate these differences, and can finally achieve a critical outlook regarding his/her own cultural tradition through reflection. Although this is a desirable outcome of interaction in intercultural encounters, I nevertheless point at another aspect of communication between self and other that can be interpreted within a dialogical perspective.

According to the idea of immigrancy of the self (Cavell, 1996), the self is defined through the act of negotiating and translating meanings. This means that, although we are born into a language community from which we acquire social meanings,

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we live from the beginning in a process of translation, in negotiating the modalities in which the language and the conventions of the community are appropriated in unique ways. Adopting this description of the self, I propose that in open-ended dialogue self and other do not simply accept their reciprocal belonging to different cultural traditions, thus becoming tolerant of the other, but through interaction they discover the fact that they are both incomplete beings. This existential discovery creates an asymmetrical relation with the other (Levinas, 1985,1998), meaning that the other is not simply a mirror reflecting the otherness present within the self, instead both self and other find a common existential state of incompleteness expressed in the inadequacy of culture to explain the behaviour of the other interlocutor. Thus, intercultural communication acquires a dialogic dimension, intended in terms of a promise of deferred understanding that is ever receding and open ended, requiring commitment and ethical responsibility from both self and other, through interactions that are experienced in the *here* and *now* of intercultural encounters.

Self and other in interaction

Having delineated the theoretical underpinnings of dialogic competence, in this section I illustrate the positions of self and other in interaction and the respective underlying values of each framework.

 Deardorff. The pyramid model

Self	Knowledge and skills	Other
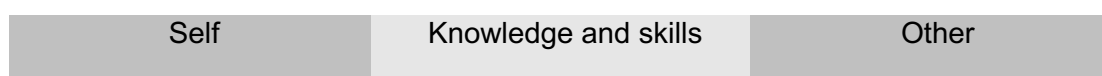
Competence is understood as the ability to deal effectively with the other. Knowledge about the culture of the other, and the skills to communicate effectively are acquired before the interaction.

Underlying values: effectiveness, communicative transparency, tolerance, awareness of culture, rationality, autonomy, cultural sensitivity.

| Self	Knowledge and skills	Other	Transformation/Intercultural personhood

ICOPROMO. A transformational model

Intercultural competence represents the ability to develop critical awareness of culture in order to communicate effectively. As a result of intercultural interaction, the self is transformed into an intercultural speaker who can communicate effectively with the other and is able to assess cultures critically, showing high degrees of tolerance of the other.

Underlying values: effectiveness, critical awareness of culture, autonomy, rationality, tolerance, sensitivity, responsibility.

Dialogic competence

Self and Other	Interaction	Other and Other
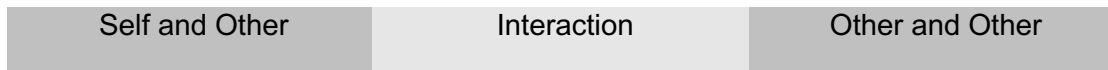
Competence is built in interaction: it is based on the interdependence self/other and on the appreciation of context. Interaction results in the recognition of a reciprocal and common existential state of incompleteness. Intercultural encounters represent the opportunity to discover the otherness in the familiar, and to accept the fact that both self and other remain unknowable.

Underlying values: culture as a discursive resource of all interlocutors, reciprocal incompleteness of both self and other, heteronomy, sensibility, ethical responsibility, dialogism.

In the latter model, the development of existential attitudes in interaction brings about the acceptance of uncertainty in dialogue and the knowledge that both self and other are incomplete beings. These attitudes, and their underlying values, challenge the implicit autonomy that characterises the ways in which intercultural competence is conceptualised in the other two models discussed in this paper. In dialogic terms, competence requires the development of intercultural sensibility, meaning an embodied relation with the other, which I contrast to the ideas of

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intercultural awareness and sensitivity promoted in the pyramid model and the ICOPROMO project.

With the notion of sensibility, Levinasian ethics suggests an alternative conceptualization of the relation with the other, based on the perception of embodiment in the ethical encounter. Whereas awareness and sensitivity develop in the autonomous and self-sufficient dimension of the self, sensibility represents the bodily aspect of experience and indicates pre-reflective engagement, meaning that the self as a sentient being is affected by the presence of the embodied other. This fact creates the preconditions for the development of an ethical concern for the other stemming from the *here and now,* meaning the immediacy of lived experience. The ethical, in other words, is embedded in the materiality with which the self is engaged in everyday existence,

> We live from 'good soup', air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc…These are not objects of representations. We live from them (Levinas, 2008, p.110).

Taking this materiality in consideration, it is important to highlight how this understanding of the ethical does not necessarily entail that engagement with the other is devoid of difficulties. On the contrary, it implies a traumatic element of discovery of the self as a sentient being who is faced with the ethical choice to respond to the presence of an other. This response, however, can assume the aspect of refusal of engagement, of fear or of misunderstanding. The crucial point is that this material presence of the other will pose ethical demands and ethical challenges, which the self is called to acknowledge.

With the reading of Levinas presented in this chapter, I invite to reflect on the dialogic aspects of communication that reveal intercultural interaction in terms of an encounter based on unpredictability, open-endedness and ethical concern for the other. From this standpoint, I highlight instances of intercultural communication in practice that are documented in other fields of research, which illustrate complexity and precariousness in communication. For example, the presence of

a dominant other in situations of clear inequality is documented in ethnographic research on asylum seekers in the Belgian legal system (Maryns and Blommaert 2002; Maryns, 2006) and research on grassroots literacy with African migrants and asylum seekers in Belgium (Blommaert, 2001, 2004). Similarly, Phipps (2014) proposes an interdisciplinary connection with the field of Peace and Security Studies (e.g. Lederach, 2003 and Schirch, 2004), emphasising the challenge faced by intercultural communication theory to address openly issues of conflict. These examples borrowed from other academic fields point in the direction of a productive confrontation with other disciplines that share similar concerns regarding human understanding and co-operation, presenting new challenges for future research.

To summarise, the following characteristics represent the broad features that I suggest could contribute to the redefinition of competence in dialogic terms:

- **Asymmetry**: I understand the asymmetrical relation between self and other in terms of a lived experience of communication between embodied subjects.
- **Heteronomy**: this aspect stands for the phenomenal world where the self interacts with other selves. The experience of ethics is thus developed in interaction, intersubjectively, and not only from universal maxims.
- **Sensibility**: being affected by others as an embodied ethical self. Understood in this sense, I suggest the notion of intercultural sensibility to illustrate the type of dialogic engagement with the other that I propose in relation to the notion of competence.
- **Promise as deferred understanding***: this concept relates to the idea of dialogue as open- ended engagement with others, and acceptance of uncertainty.

In reference to the notion of tolerance discussed in relation to Derrida, I contend that the idea of deferred understanding presented here addresses these concerns

relating to a superficial embrace of cultural difference as tolerance of the practices of the cultural other. Particularly, it addresses the dangers of reification and totality that occur when the necessity to determine the outcome pacifies the unpredictability of dialogue, so that the promise of understanding is totalised in the search for a final dimension of reconciliation of differences.

Conclusion

The philosophical discussion conducted in this chapter reflects the state of flux and theoretical development of intercultural communication research, particularly in the formulation of non-essentialist approaches to the conceptualisation of intercultural understanding and ethical responsibility in communication. This situation in research is exemplified by Martin and Nakayama who, reflecting on their previous conceptualisation of culture and communication, argue that this particular field of research has currently not achieved a unified methodological approach,

> After ten years, revisiting the contemporary terrain of Intercultural communication seems warranted. The field has exploded in many different directions that have opened up the very notion of 'intercultural' communication. In some ways, the term itself, 'intercultural', tends to presume the interaction between discrete and different cultures. (…). Ten years later, the very problem of conceptualising 'intercultural communication' remains as vibrant and relevant as ever (Martin and Nakayama, 2010, p.59).

This proliferation of different approaches opens intercultural communication to theoretical interventions that offer new epistemological and methodological frameworks. With the adoption of philosophical argumentation, I have attempted to reconceptualise competence from a dialogic perspective, emphasising the provisional character of interaction between self and other in intercultural encounters. Indeed, the state of flux of intercultural theory described in this chapter provides the opportunity to shift the focus from predominant discourses related to business relations, intercultural training and language learning in higher education to the development of viable alternative perspectives that redefine the immanent and contingent nature of intercultural dialogue.

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