

The Concept of the “Polylogue” and the Question of “Intercultural” Identity

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In this study, two different ideas will be analyzed, the concept of the *polylogue*, which was developed by Franz Martin Wimmer, and the assumption of an *intercultural* identity. The complementary relationship between the two ideas will be expounded. In a polylogue, individuals are confronted with several dialogue partners from different cultures simultaneously; the term is used to emphasize that many perspectives need to be considered, rather than just two, as the word *dialogue* seems to imply. Due to its different approach, the idea of the polylogue will profoundly affect the structure of intercultural communication. This study also takes the multicultural nature of actual reality into account, presupposes the human ability to accept different cultures, and attempts to explore the relations between interculturally capable individuals and multicultural society. Under the assistance of a conception of an intercultural identity, finding one’s identity not only involves one’s own pre-existing tradition but also includes influences from other cultures as well. Employing the concept of the polylogue and relying on the human capacity for multicultural acceptance, individuals should be able to construct their own personal intercultural identities and communicate with others interculturally.

The concept and term *polylogue* stems from Franz Martin Wimmer (Wimmer, 2004), a contemporary Austrian philosopher who employs the concept in order to surmount the so-called Eurocentrism in philosophical thinking. Not only does he criticize the standard, narrow-minded way of philosophizing, in using the term polylogue, he also intends to reject every possible form of cultural centrism, such as Sinocentrism and Americacentrism. In his view, philosophizing is a permanent activity, a continual process in which voices from different cultures are taken into consideration equally. The concept of polylogue affords philosophy the opportunity to escape from its occidental solitude.

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate whether Wimmer’s concept of polylogue is applicable in the context of communication theory and to explore communicative consequences if *interculturality* is set up as a precondition for the polylogue. To achieve this goal, the argumentation of this paper is divided into three sections. First, the meanings behind philosophical and communicative polylogue are to be differentiated. The conception of *intercultural* identity will be explored as the second step, at which point differences between *cultural* and intercultural identity will be carefully examined. Finally, the mutual relation of polylogue and intercultural identity will be analyzed.

The Concept of Polylogue

The term polylogue derives from two ancient Greek words, namely *poly-* and *logos*. *Poly-* can be translated as “many,” while *logos* has a number of important meanings, including, for example, “word” and “reason” in its most basic signification as well as its most relevant implications. If used as a compound word, *polylogue* signifies “garrulity” or “chattiness,” or in German, *Geschwätzigkeit*, a term describing a state in which everyone is talking at once while nobody is actually listening. In other words, when used to describe a person, a polylogue could also refer to someone who speaks without reasoning.

Analyzing the term polylogue etymologically, the two extreme positions the term can take on when attempting to bring different voices together already come to light. A positive understanding of the term finds many different ways of thinking reconciled and articulated reasonably. Interpreted negatively, different voices are ensnared in their own particularities; consequently, no common ground can be found.

The term polylogue was already shaped by Julia Kristeva in 1977 in her book of the same title. According to Kristeva, polylogue refers to multiple logics, speeches, and existences (Kristeva, 1977). Her intention is to reveal polylogic meanings of dynamic signifying processes that appear in various practices, such as language, discourse, literature, and paintings. There is no doubt that the idea of the polylogue is related to another term coined by Kristeva, namely that of *intertextuality*. Kristeva is interested in making different meanings communicable with one another; therefore *logos* is, in her view, an interlinked and plural phenomenon. It should not go unnoted that it is Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism (Bakhtin, & Holquist, 1981) that has greatly influenced Kristeva’s as well as our own understanding of the *dialogue*. The basic idea of the Bakhtinian dialogue, which derives from literary theory, states that dialogic work, in contrast to monologic work, undergoes a constant exchange of meaning between other works and other authors. In other words, dialogism is a multi-leveled continual communication and not a mere dialogue, as the word might seem to imply.

When compared with Kristeva and Bakhtin, Wimmer’s approach derives from a different discourse context. His proposition does not deny or modify Kristeva’s concept of the polylogue, nor Bakhtin’s dialogism. He analyzes the term polylogue philosophically from an intercultural perspective. His main concern is the interaction between cultures in light of the universalistic claim of philosophy and whether interculturality and universality are contradictory to each other.

Conceptual Differences Between the Polylogue and Dialogue

The ambiguous nature of the term polylogue is rather representative of the situation in which our globalized world presently finds itself: the various nations, societies, and cultures of the world might somehow come to a consensus; or, equally possible, their approaches to agreement could end in complete ignorance of one another. Accentuating the importance of the polylogue does not indicate the dialogue to be an obsolete form of communication.

Clearly, it is impossible to genuinely speak with numerous individuals all at once. But in light of so much diversity, it is perhaps advisable to bear in mind while engaging in dialogue that there are many more voices to be heard in the background. In the context of a polylogue, such as our current globalized reality, and in order to legitimate diversity, the crucial question is not how universal influence is to be achieved, but rather quite the opposite: namely, how to be affected by all other participating entities. Here too, our effect upon others is not to be denied; still, the others' influence should remain in the foreground.

It bears remembering that ideally, we should be influenced equally by all other individuals, cultures, and traditions. Although the notion of the polylogue appears to be an idealistic model, it represents the communicative reality of our globalized world. The question now arises as to why someone would want to be equally influenced by all other cultures. Is it even possible to be equally influenced at all? Or might there be an alternative way, such as making a selection according to personal preference?

As an idealistic model, the aim of the polylogue appears utopian. How can equality be achieved, particularly when cultures are phenomena that cannot be quantified or measured? Due to its idealistic nature, the polylogue also orients our actions. It is not usual practice to examine whether or not our propositions are interculturally valid, as previously, a universally valid proposition was automatically considered to be interculturally valid as well. But since we are aware of the controversial relationship that exists between interculturality and universality, shouldn't we attempt to avoid any form of cultural centrism by employing the polylogue as a valuable means of orienting our actions and words? Although it is possible that we do not wish to be equally influenced by other cultures, in order to maintain our claim to interculturality, which has now become central to establishing a universal idea, we should at least make an effort to allow ourselves as much as possible to be exposed to an array of traditions.

Philosophical Meaning of Polylogue

Generally, it is a difficult task for philosophers to be influenced by others. Of course, there are philosophers who hold their predecessors in high esteem, yet their predecessors' theories are replete with details that must be rejected or require adjustment. Participating in a polylogue in philosophy seems nearly impossible, as philosophers tend to demonstrate a desire to communicate to others their own understanding of truth, wisdom, virtue, and so forth. They seem to have little intention of listening to others, for basically, they are already completely convinced by their own version of the true nature of reality. In other words, they feel they are speaking in the name of universality.

By incorporating the concept of the polylogue, we should be able to structure an idealistic path towards uncovering truth in the light of plurality. First, we must analyze the flow of influence affecting people.

According to Wimmer (2004), there are four models concerning the flow of influence. He schematizes the four models as follows:

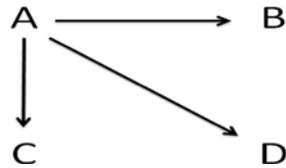


Figure 1. Unilateral centristic influence: Monologue model¹

No outside influences move towards A, while indifference and ignorance preside over all others. Meanwhile, A's influence works equally in all directions. Thus, one and only one intention of influencing is imagined proceeding in all directions.

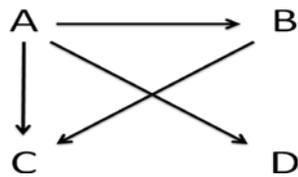


Figure 2. Unilateral and transitive influence: Extended monologue model

In this stage, no dialogues are necessary, although the double-sided influence on C (from A, as well as from B) makes comparative descriptions between A and B possible. In this case, every other tradition remains *barbarian* for A. B ignores D, while C also ignores D. However, B imitates A and thereby *civilizes* C with concepts partly derived from A.

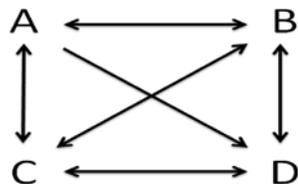


Figure 3. Partially bilateral and multilateral influence: Dialogues model

Partially bilateral and multilateral influences are processes of selective acculturation. The stage symbolized in the last paradigm represents a polylogue between all relevant traditions with the exclusion of D.

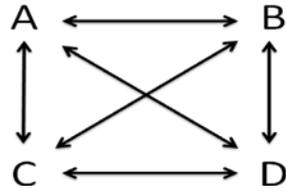


Figure 4. Complete multilateral influence: Polylogue model

Influences from all sides affect every tradition, and each is interested in all other traditions. All of the influences are working with equal intensity, and one and only one intended influence arises from each position and moves to affect another. This situation again does not represent reality. Still, it is important to ask whether such an ideal might serve as a regulative means of practising philosophy on a global scale.

The arrows connecting A, B, C, and D represent the directions of influence. Wimmer is naturally aware that the polylogue is constructed as an idealistic model and thus knows that an entirely equal flow of influence can never be achieved in reality. Nonetheless, the polylogue model can at least function as a means of orienting a world of diversity in which everyone is eager to make universal claims.

What Wimmer attempts to conceptualize as a philosopher is a theoretical approach to a philosophical universal truth.² Therefore, he emphasizes conviction as a communicative method of the polylogue. Of course, we can employ measures other than conviction to lead others to believe that we are right. Different approaches include, for example, persuading people to believe our version of the truth by offering them material goods or by speaking with them incessantly. In actuality, these two methods are generally not favored by the virtuous, veritable philosopher, but rather by demagogues or politicians. The philosopher would prefer to convince others with enlightening arguments.

“Convincing someone” implies that the end goal entails the other understanding us correctly and agreeing with us entirely. The question then arises: are philosophers not asking too much of the other? It makes no difference whether we affirm or deny this question. In effect, answering the question at all is the intention of all philosophical argumentation.

Possible Meaning of the Polylogue in Terms of Intercultural Communication

Stepping down from the meta-level of philosophy, the question remains as to whether the polylogue model is applicable in intercultural communication as well as in intercultural philosophy, as it is for Wimmer. The most important distinction that should be made is that their underlying purposes differ completely. In the case of *intercultural philosophy*, the ultimate purpose of communications among philosophers is the collective approach of the so-

called truth; as a result, a system of mutual conviction should be implemented. According to Wimmer, the leading communicative method is conviction. However, in order to convince or to be convinced, it is important to first understand each other correctly, and this mutual understanding cannot be achieved without listening to others. In intercultural philosophy or simply intercultural communication, we are reliant upon what we hear and what we understand from others. In comparison with philosophy, intercultural communication may not necessitate reaching a point of mutual conviction; still, listening to one another in order to gain understanding should be taken seriously. Besides, we must also bear in mind that the purpose of intercultural communication is less extensive than philosophical conviction but beyond simply listening.

The previous discussion leads to further questions: how do we listen to and understand others who stem from other cultures in intercultural communications? Can we listen and understand without getting involved in issues concerning other cultures? And a fundamental question that often appears unanswerable: how can we understand cultures that are completely different from our own? As previously mentioned, the polylogue is a communicative structure that makes equality between participating individuals possible; but apparently, this equality cannot be achieved without some understanding of the other's culture. Intercultural orientation is of course a required condition of such knowledge, but the question also revolves around ways in which to understand another culture and to listen to representatives of different cultures effectively.

In the following, the author presupposes the human capacity to accept different cultures. With the assistance of the conception of intercultural identity, we shall see that uncovering one's own identity not only involves one's own pre-existing tradition but also includes influences from other cultures as well.

The Conception of Intercultural Identity

At first glance, the conception of intercultural identity seems contradictory. Usually, the term *identity* is used in combination with the adjective *cultural*. Cultural identity refers to cultural background; for example, to the nation or place in which someone was brought up. To what type of identity is referred in the case of intercultural identity? What, in fact, is intercultural? In contrast to cultural identity, intercultural identity does not depend upon a specific culture to aid a person in finding his or her identity; the referent of intercultural identity appears not to exist at all.

To be able to answer these questions, we must first analyze the meaning of the word *identity*. Gaining an understanding of the method of self-identification may help us unveil the referent of so-called intercultural.

Cultural Identity: Memorial Path to Identity

Terms like *identity*, *to identify*, or words which contain *ident-*, derive from the Latin word *idem*, which has the meaning of "the same." With respect to the same, clearly, at least two

things are needed. These two things may consist of two different entities or of a single entity in two different instances of time. In either instance, a referring and a referred entity can be differentiated. In analyzing the temporal relation between the referring and referred entity, the conclusion is easily drawn that the referred entity must have existed prior to the referring entity. The meaning of *identity* or of *to identify* thus entails determining the pre-existing referred entity. In other words, identification points in the direction of *memory*, towards everything that happened previously.

In light of this interpretation of *ident-*, cultural identity can be located somewhere in the collective memory of our homeland and our family, as well as in the personal private memory, as the term *cultural roots* already indicates. At this point, there is no need to discuss what Indian or German culture entails because we only wish to examine the temporal relation between the referring subject and the referred culture that is so decisive for the understanding of identity. What, however, is meant by time in the context of cultural identity?

The distinction made by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1991) between time and duration in his book *Matière et Mémoire* might prove helpful in our analysis of time. In his view, time should be perceived as duration and not simply as a composite of the past, present, and future (Bergson, 1991). In natural sciences, time is often conceived of in terms of a time line, as something measurable; for example, the current year is 2010, the year prior was 2009, and the following year will be 2011. In language lessons, in order to visualize time, teachers often draw a horizontal time line with several vertical strokes to indicate the past, present, and future. Numbers and lines thus aid our conceptions of time, which cannot actually be seen in the real world. We may certainly register changes in the natural surroundings, such as a sunrise or sunset, but we can never perceive time itself. Rather than identify time precisely, the various fields of science can only help us acquire a better understanding of the concept of time.

Without measuring instruments, we must rely upon our memory. The time perceived in our memory is not simply a collection of disjointed points of time but rather a duration, which expresses itself in intertwining contexts, or—to employ postmodern language—in merging fluids. Considering time as duration, we no longer organize time in chains of causes and effects. The past now has a different meaning, as we reject positioning past events in the coordinate system of time or regarding them as simple successions of facts. Speaking symbolically, we dig past events out of our memory and re-present or visualize them in our presents. In other words, remembering the past involves envisioning it in the state of our actual being. Consequently, memory does not merely belong to the past, but acts in the present as well. Returning to the past is to re-present the past within the present moment.

Now, we must ask: What is the meaning of memory with respect to the question of cultural identity? What is the relation between memory, culture, and identity?

Similar to the term *identity*, the word *culture* also encompasses our relation to memory. The occidental term *culture* originates from the Latin verb *colere*, which can encompass the following meanings: “to build on,” “to inhabit,” “to refine,” and “to cultivate.” What these various meanings share is some sort of improvement by intention; through the activity of *colere*, something in a more “natural” or “raw” condition is brought into a more “cultivated”

or “civilized” condition. At the very least, a qualitative difference exists between the condition before and after the activity of *colere*.

The Latin noun *cultura* derives from the verb *colere* and implies that an improved condition can only be realized with great effort and by means of the continuous repetition of a certain activity. For example, the word *agricultura*, or “agriculture,” possesses the meaning of maintaining a field. The verb *colere* and the noun *cultura* indicate a refining activity and the continuity of this activity, with the repetition of the activity acting as an essential component of the activity itself.

Wimmer differentiates two different accentuations of the concept of culture, namely *cultura creata*³ and *cultura quae creat*⁴ (Wimmer, 2003). A certain *cultural condition* is thus achieved in carrying out the activity of *colere*. On the other hand, cultural action does not emphasize the achieved condition; instead the focus is on the current activity itself. From the perspective of *cultural action*, culture is not a static condition; it is produced by continuous actions and therefore rather dynamic.

Cultural condition and cultural action cannot be regarded as pure conditions. Reality consists more of *cultura creata quae creat*⁵, in which every action is necessarily based on a previous accomplished action. *Cultura non creata quae creat*⁶ is thus, logically speaking, impossible.

With the help of Wimmer’s distinction between cultural condition and cultural action, we now discover that cultural identity does not refer to memory alone but is also a matter of creativity, as in the case of “a created culture which creates.” In the following, a *visional* access to identity, which also takes the creative aspect into account, is discussed.

Intercultural Identity: Visional Path to Identity

When addressing identity and its relation to time, we cannot ignore Heidegger. In his book *Being and Time*, he describes that we must come to accept the fact that we are “thrown” into this world unsolicited (Heidegger, 1931). He denotes this particular situation as *Geworfenheit* or *Faktizität*, which can be rendered as *thrownness* and *factuality* in English. He characterizes the reaction to this situation as *Entwurf* or *Existentialität*, that is to say, as *concept* or *existentiality*. The English translation of the term *Entwurf* fails to reproduce his intentional combination of the words *Geworfenheit* and *Entwurf*, both of which derive from the German verb *werfen*, translated as “to throw.” To simplify Heidegger’s thoughts: in order to conceptualize ourselves—*entwerfen* in German—we must already exist somewhere or have previously been thrown into the world, a state he terms *Geworfenheit*.

Clearly, Heidegger intended to emphasize the conceptual, or *visional*, character of our being. Conceptualizing or envisioning ourselves thus becomes a necessary condition for our own existentiality. This thesis is also advocated by the French existentialist Sartre, whose maxim maintained that “existence precedes essence,” that is to say that being contains no essence prior to its existence (Sartre, 1985).

As previously mentioned, the term *ident-* requires at least two *different* momenta, and differences between these two momenta are realized through a process of identification.

Although it may seem paradoxical, in reality, difference is what makes identity or identification possible, as many postmodern philosophers, such as Derrida and Deleuze, point out.

Derrida's *différance* implies that words can never represent what they mean, but can only be defined through additional words, from which they differ (Derrida, 2004). In his book, *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze emphasizes the relevance of difference and even desires to liberate difference from the captivity of identity (Deleuze, 1997). It was his intention to "think of a free independent difference beyond the classical categories such as identity, similarity, analogy and contradiction" (Welsch, 1997, p. 141). Deleuze is also the one who accentuates the importance of the aspect of repetition in light of Nietzsche's concept of the *eternal return* (Deleuze, 1991). In other words, he regards identity as a fundamental and continuing process and being as a continuation of becoming and being different.

In contrast with usual identity theories, Derrida and Deleuze both refuse to rely exclusively upon the *memorial* method of identifying one's self. Instead, they place stress on differences that must be determined independently. Being is being different. In their eyes, identity is neither solely self-positioning in the coordinate system of culture, nor does it involve locating oneself in the collective memory; it challenges our creativity. Consequently, discovery of differences depends upon our visions, which is the reason for the distinction between memorial and visual paths towards identity.

Conclusion: Mutuality of the Polylogue and Intercultural Identity

After careful examination of the structure of identity, we are now ready to explore what is meant by intercultural identity. To be able to identify ourselves, we must be able to conceive of ourselves differently, to differ in our minds from how we have been previously, to conceptualize and to envision ourselves. Identifying ourselves culturally not only entails remembering what we have already been, it also implies that we must reinvent ourselves. Being or creating ourselves anew does not require us to rely exclusively upon our pre-existing cultural identity. It is possible to create or reinvent ourselves with the help of every culture that we encounter. Our identity is thus not inextricably linked with our cultural "heritage" or the "burden" of our civilization; it is also connected with our intercultural visions. Being is not only being cultural but intercultural as well.

The question may now be raised as to the difference between being cultural and intercultural. In order to conceptualize, envision, or re-invent ourselves, we need to communicate with people from different cultures by means of polylogues. As mentioned above, the polylogue model is created in order to structure intercultural philosophical reasoning. It is an idealistic model, in which voices from different cultures are respected equally for the sake of the process of uncovering universal truths among cultures. The method of philosophical polylogue, as previously explained, involves conviction, as opposed to just "listening and understanding" in the case of the *communicative* polylogue.

Similar to Wimmer's definition of culture as "cultura creata quae creat," both memorial and visual paths are necessary in order to be and to create or invent oneself. The two are

complementary to one another. Through listening and understanding other cultures—that is to say, empathizing with and taking on thought processes of individuals from different cultures—and simultaneously recollecting our own cultural backgrounds, we will be able to conceptualize, to envision, and to reinvent ourselves interculturally.

Communication does not necessarily take place in an intercultural way. But if interculturality is set up as precondition for communication, it is necessary to take the concerns of different traditions into account. As the author suggested, intercultural communication not only entails understanding different cultures but also signifies finding and expressing one's own intercultural identity. *Communication* in its Latin original meaning as “com-municare,” that is to say, as sharing something with one another, as opposed to simply transmitting information from one to the other, connotes that community emerges in a continual cultural process. If we do not think and act interculturally by sharing information with different cultures, how can intercultural communication be expected to take place at all?

As previously mentioned, the main purpose of this paper is to analyze whether the concept of the polylogue is applicable in the context of communication theory. As an idealistic model, the function of the polylogue differs from that of descriptive models, such as Lasswell's formula, “Who says what to whom in what channel with what effect” (Lasswell, 1948, p. 37), which rebuilds the structural processes of communication. Rather than reconstruct processes in reality, the polylogue suggests a virtual or ideal condition in which communication should take place. The polylogue thus acts as a means of orientation or a directive for successful communication. As a consequence of its idealistic nature, the polylogue formulates its questions differently, making such queries as to what cultural influences and what types of power relations allow for communication to take place and whether or not said communication is at all interculturally motivated. Without these kinds of questions, tolerance would not be such a central issue. It is the polylogue that leads to these communicative consequences. Thus, the polylogue is indeed applicable to communication theory, not as a descriptive communication model, but rather as a phenomenon that establishes the necessary and appropriate conditions or circumstances for communication to take place.

Notes

1. Wimmer uses different forms of arrows to illustrate his idea of the polylogue. In 2003, he uses unidirectional arrows, switching to bidirectional arrows in 2004. Bidirectional arrows appear to be a further development of the polylogue model. The author reconstructs the polylogue model in accordance with the most recent depiction.
2. The word approach is taken here to stress that we can never actually know the truth in Wimmer's view.
3. This Latin phrase can be translated as “created culture” or “cultural condition,” or as *Kulturzustand* in German.
4. This Latin phrase can be translated as “culture which creates” or “cultural action,” or as *Kulturhandeln* in German.

5. This Latin phrase can be translated as “a created culture that creates.”
 6. Latin for “a not yet created culture which creates.”

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