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Material culture and intercultural communication

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Abstract

Artifacts, i.e., the material side of culture, and their relevance for intercultural interactions rarely caught the attention of interculturalists. This may be partly due to the scholarly traditions of the involved disciplines (except for cultural anthropology), partly to the popular but false belief that “the language of things is universal”. Experience shows that material culture plays an important role both in the macro-contexts of peoples and on the micro-level of intercultural interactions. Integrating material culture studies can increase the understanding of the problems in development aid, technology transfer, marketing, or personal intercultural interactions. Artifacts are products of complex transaction and communication processes and of cultural knowledge and experience. Once they are produced, they usually initiate and influence many more communicative processes. In intercultural interactions, they can gain relevance (1) as themes of intercultural communication, and they are always present (2) as contexts of such interactions. Intercultural communication is (3) carried out increasingly by means of technical objects (telephone, fax, PC), just as the (4) international transmission (or communication) of things is at the very heart of the global economy. Even if people in different cultures can buy the same global products, (5) their use of them and their relationships to them, will be as different as the meanings given to them. (6) People turn things into signs, they communicate through objects in ways that are laid out by their culture; and finally, (7) understanding another culture also means decoding the messages built into its objects. Therefore, intercultural learning and competence should also include the ability to use the things of culture as indicators to norms, values, and basic assumptions. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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The publications in Intercultural Communication reveal that the approaches, theories, and methods of the discipline focus almost exclusively on the *immaterial*

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aspects of intercultural interactions, i.e., on language, non-verbal expressions, and behaviors of the actors as well as on their perceptions, attitudes, and values. Only occasionally is the *material environment* included in the reflections, usually in the form of food or furnishings of offices and apartments, but it only serves to demonstrate social or territorial behaviors, cultural values or the characterization of the physical environment of intercultural interactions (cf. Samovar & Porter, 1991, pp. 215–218; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, pp. 117–120; Ferraro, 1990, pp. 22–24). In more recent intercultural topographies and travel guides for practitioners,¹ the material environment is given some more attention. If a field of material culture is treated more extensively, e.g., in the omnibus volumes “Food as a Culture Theme” (Wierlacher, Neumann, & Teuteberg, 1993), “Food and Culture” (Counihan & Esterik, 1997), “Food and Cultural Identity” (Teuteberg, 1997), or “Food, A culinary history from antiquity to the present” (Flandrin & Montanari, 1999), it is more the *intra-cultural* aspects of national, regional, and religious identities that are at stake. On the other hand, numerous ethnological, sociological, and cultural historical works deal extensively with the material culture of various peoples and cultures, but they never refer to personal intercultural communication; the volume “Material World” (Menzel, 1994), which documents complete households in 40 countries of the world, is probably the most impressive example of this approach.

That material culture plays an important role not only in the macro-contexts of peoples and countries but also in the micro-contexts of actual intercultural interactions is demonstrated very clearly, for example, by Brislin’s (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong 1986) collection of ‘critical incidents’: in about one fifth of the represented critical intercultural situations material culture is relevant, above all food, food habits and coping with alien food, as well as the use of apartments, cars, technical implements, clothing or presents; in some cases, the objects are the cause of the intercultural misunderstanding.² In spite of this, material culture is never really integrated into theoretical reflections but merely serves to demonstrate certain behaviors, attributes or values (Brislin et al., 1986, pp. 39–42).

The neglect of material culture in Intercultural Communication is surprising, because as early as 1959 the cultural anthropologist Hall explicitly integrated the material environment as an “extension of the body” in his book “Silent Language” which laid the foundations for Intercultural Communication as an academic discipline.³ He emphasized that the material artifacts are a part of each of the 10 primary message systems, above all of *exploitation*, *subsistence*, and *territoriality* (Hall, 1959, pp. 162–185, 194f). “Materials and the rest of culture are intimately intertwined”, he noted and emphasized the particularly close connection between material culture and language (Hall, 1959, p. 57). In “Hidden Dimensions”, he dealt

¹See, for example, the series “Culture Shock” published by Kuperard, London, and the series “Kulturschock” of the P. Rump Verlag, Bielefeld.

²See the *critical incidents* nos. 1–3, 5, 13, 21f., 25, 29, 31, 34, 36, 40, 43f., 46, 49, 54, 57, and 67.

³On the history of Intercultural Communication and on the impact of Hall’s approach see Leeds-Hurwitz (1990) and Landis and Wasilewski (1999).

in greater detail regarding the role of architecture, of furniture, and of the automobile, and above all the aspect of proxemics and the perception of space (Hall, 1966, pp. 51–63, 174–177). Hall's ideas have not been taken up and advanced by interculturalists, though, and the material environment of intercultural interactions is also not among the 18 issues which Landis and Wasilewski (1999) consider to be worthy of further intercultural communication research.

The low regard for material culture is also surprising because almost all cultural anthropological definitions of “culture” explicitly include material artifacts. In addition, one cannot ignore the fact that values, attitudes, and norms are made “visible” only through their manifestations in artifacts and in their use, and that it is a vital ability of humans to draw conclusions from the visible objects to the invisible attitudes, values, thoughts, and feelings of their producers, owners or users. It is certainly the visibility and sensuality of material objects and the way human perception functions which explain why in encounters with foreign worlds it is always (apart from racial differences) the material culture which attracts the visitors' attention first. The travel reports and topographies from the late Middle Ages to the present show that it was invariably the exoticism of the material world which caught the eyes of the travelers.⁴ Therefore, it is no coincidence that the seemingly “typical” forms of houses, costumes, and food suggested to the collectors and scholars of the 19th century *ethno-culturally* defined “house type regions”, “national costumes” and “national dishes”, and that the “national” material culture played an important role in nation-building processes (cf. Löfgren, 1995; Sandgruber, 1997). In addition, connecting “typical” dishes with regions or nations was a favorite form of stereotyping (see below).

Finally, the neglect of material culture is surprising in view of the fact that as a result of colonization, mercantilism, and industrialization Europe and North America witnessed a tremendous expansion of private and public “universes of objects”. Through this, the material environment gained an ever growing importance for the everyday life and for the self-definition of people in industrialized societies which increasingly defined themselves through their material consumption. In our present era of global trade and exchange of commodities, striving for material goods seems to have become the only driving force for action.

Two reasons appear to be responsible for the disregard of the material environment in Intercultural Communication. On the one hand, it seems to be important that the relevant research and teaching (particularly in the US) have largely been carried out by linguists, psychologists, and scholars in speech communication and education whose disciplinary traditions offer no direct access to material culture. Therefore, it is only logical that their definitions of culture either

⁴The countless itineraries of European travelers to the Ottoman Empire and to Asia from the 14th to the 20th century, for example, abound with vivid descriptions of the exotic material world they encountered: of streets and means of transportation, of crowded markets and coffee-houses, of secluded private homes and their lush interiors, of colorful carpets and costumes, of tasty or distasteful meals and beverages (such as “black Turkish coffee”), of strange ritual objects and tools (cf. the works cited in Roth & Wolf, 1993, pp. 465–507). It must be added that modern travel guides continue this tradition by focusing on “sights”, i.e., on unusual material objects, monuments, or works of art.

disregard material culture (Gudykunst, 1994, pp. 36–38; cf. Kincaid, 1987; Carbaugh, 1990) or mention it only marginally (Ferraro, 1990, p. 18; Samovar & Porter, 1991, p. 50f.; Maletzke, 1996, p. 16; Katriel, 1995); in discussing the four paradigms of social research, Martin and Nakayama (1999, p. 9) briefly refer to the Critical Theory approach and its insistence on the “significance of the structures and material conditions that guide and constrain the possibilities of cultural contact, intercultural communication, and cultural change”.

On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice that as a result of modernization and industrial mass production the former variety of regional and ethnic material cultures has fallen prey to unification and universalization, while certain regional and national products have become available worldwide. Artifacts that once used to be culture specific have become international commodities. Industrial products resemble each other more and more through worldwide production and are marketed and consumed globally. Automobile producers have to design an “image” for their cars to make them discernible for their customers. All these developments seemed to make the study of material culture more and more irrelevant.

My paper departs from the conviction that in spite of these developments the study of the everyday material environment is very relevant for Intercultural Communication. Understanding material culture can lead to a better understanding of intercultural interactions and can help understand why, for example, there are so many problems in development aid and technology transfer, in international industrial projects and in marketing, and why there are so many misunderstandings in interactions between individuals from different cultures. It is not my intention, though, to present a comparative analysis of material objects with regard to their form and functions, their aesthetics and uses or the ideas, values, or meanings connected with them. Ethnology, cultural anthropology, and folklore have produced large amounts of literature on these topics which need not be presented here. I would rather attempt to focus on those relations between humans and material culture which are—directly or indirectly—relevant for intercultural interactions. The inclusion of material culture into the theoretical basis of Intercultural Communication is a task to which the ethnological or anthropological sciences should commit themselves, because of their long research tradition and expertise in this field.

If we want to answer the question what meanings material objects have for (intercultural) communication we must begin with the observation that all artifacts are products of complex transaction and communication processes and that a lot of cultural knowledge and experience is “built” into them. Once they are produced, they usually initiate and influence many more communicative processes. This can happen both in their culture of origin and (increasingly) outside it. In everyday-situations, these processes are usually interrelated, so that several of them can be effective at the same time. If in the following pages I suggest some differentiations and categories, then I do this for analytical reasons and with a focus on intercultural interactions.

Relationships between material culture and intercultural communication result (1) from the simple fact that material culture is an everyday topic or theme of

(intercultural) communication and that (2) as a material context it “wraps” each act of communication. In the form of technical instruments it can (3) be a medium for intercultural communication. Also, the objects themselves are (4) transferred or “communicated” across cultural boundaries, e.g., as merchandise. Probably the most important aspects, however, are (5) the various relationships between humans and objects, particularly the culture specific uses of things and (6) their symbolic uses. Finally, it is (7) a very important precondition for the understanding of, and the adequate behavior in, foreign cultures to be able to ‘read’ the material environment adequately. These aspects will now be discussed in more detail.

1. Objects as *themes* of intercultural communication

Material objects are one of the most frequent topics of everyday communication, both intra- and intercultural. Everyday we talk, in one form or another, about food and clothing, houses and furnishings, or about cars, in short about our material environment. In intercultural conversations, material objects make ideal topics of discussion and small talk because of their factuality and “harmlessness”. This is particularly the case when technical objects, products, and merchandise are the explicit object and cause of the intercultural contacts, as is almost always the case with negotiations, talks, or conferences on the development, design, production, marketing, and sale of products. Also, the travelers who order their meals in Japan or have their cars repaired in Spain are in a similar situation. Intercultural Communication must not neglect this material aspect, because it is precisely the “things” that seem to function as a global *lingua franca* and to give each intercultural interaction a universal frame of reference, transcending the involved persons and cultures.

The knowledge about things, about their “proper” use and the “proper” attitude towards them is culturally transmitted. This transmission takes place, as Hall (1959) has pointed out, in childhood mostly in an informal and non-verbal manner, while later in life oral and written instruction about the use of things dominates. Due to the rapid technological progress and the permanent innovation of the material world, the latter form of transmission gains ever larger importance, above all in the form of technical manuals and instructions for use. The internationalization of production, technology transfer, development programs, and the worldwide marketing of products have rapidly increased the necessity to transmit the know-how about products internationally. However, not only the way of giving *oral* instructions about the use of things is culture specific, as Kartari (1997, p. 103f) has demonstrated on the German–Turkish interface, but also *printed* product descriptions, handbooks, and instructions for use display a culture specific “discourse about things” (cf. Moosmüller, 1997, pp. 98–107).

It is not only the use of things and the attitudes towards them that are transmitted through everyday communication. The discursive exchange in a group or society also constructs ethnic, regional or national value attributions and the charging of objects with symbolic or identificational meaning (cf. Teuteberg, Neumann, & Wierlacher,

1997). These discourses can be *intracultural* and lead to the formation of identities and auto-stereotypical attributions, as the discourse about the beer brewed in accordance with the German “purity law” has demonstrated (cf. Speckle, 2001). More often, though, they are *intercultural* and lead to the identification of regions or peoples with certain elements of their material culture, e.g., their costumes; this is demonstrated already by the *Völkertafeln* (tables of peoples) of the early 18th century, on which the larger European peoples are characterized in words and pictures through their typical costumes (Stanzel, 1998, pp. 14–17). These are materialized heterostereotypes, of which the “metonymical concentration of whole cultures in a single item” of their material culture is probably the most extreme example (Antweiler, 1994, p. 148), often a particular food or dish; in the language of the Algonkin Indians, “Eskimo” means *eater of raw meat*, in the English speaking world the French are often called *frog eaters* (or simply *frogs*) and the Germans *krauts*, while the French call the English *rosbifs*; in the German speaking countries Italians are called *macaronis* (Tanner, 1997) or *spaghetts*, while the Belgians are often called *pommes frites* by their neighbors, and the Bulgarians may refer to the Romanians as *mamaligari* (polenta eaters).

2. Material objects as *contexts* of intercultural communication

The material environment is not only produced and shaped by humans but as a quasi-natural environment it directly affects their lives. In every culture, it constitutes a specific context⁵ and reality which strongly determines the experience and the everyday life of the individual. In an often forceful way, it can influence, paralyze or stimulate the individual and generate positive or negative feelings.

For analytical reasons it is useful to differentiate three dimensions of the culture-shaped material environment. First, it has a *spatial* dimension where it is advisable to separate the public space with its streets, buildings, and transport systems from the private space of houses and apartments and their furnishings, and the work-places such as factories, workshops, and offices from the spaces for leisure. Second, it has a *personal* dimension insofar as communication partners possess their personal objects (such as clothing, utensils, cars, etc.). And finally it has an *actional* dimension insofar as actions such as eating, working, celebrating, sports, or making telephone calls each require their own sets of artifacts.

For life in a foreign environment and for intercultural interactions all these material contexts can matter a great deal: Hectic and exotic street-life or deserted streets, tiny apartments with noisy backyards or spacious houses with high fences, open or closed office doors, spicy or “tasteless” food, casual dress or dress code in

⁵ Intercultural communication research is only recently turning more intensely to the macro and micro contexts of intercultural interactions (see e.g., Carbaugh, 1990; Katriel, 1995; Martin & Nakayama, 1999, pp. 7, 15f.; Delgado, 1998). The contexts are viewed as multidimensional, but the authors' emphasis is rarely on their *physical* aspects.

the office—they all can generate euphoria and stimulation just as well as stress and frustration and can even lead to psychosomatic disturbances. While the native person⁶ hardly notices his/her material environment because it is the habitual, quasi-natural life world, the stranger perceives it very intensely through all the senses, at least in the beginning, and tries to interpret it with his/her repertoire of patterns of perception and interpretation. The material environment thereby influences intercultural interactions, but this happens less on the cognitive level but more on an emotional one that is less accessible to reflection. Each sojourn in a foreign country is an excursion into more or less unfamiliar material worlds.

The effects of this sensual “otherness” differ a lot, depending on the kind of country and the experience of the individual, and they change in the course of time. While in the beginning of sojourns in a foreign environment, fascination and euphoria usually prevail, many people after some time develop feelings of alienation or even angst and aversion. The impact of unfamiliar object worlds on the course and the intensity of *culture shock* has not yet been studied adequately.⁷ It is certainly no coincidence that expatriates and emigrants often insist on their familiar objects, mostly in the spheres of the furnishing of apartments and food, a desire which often results in ethnic neighborhoods with ethnic food stores, etc. The objects brought along or imported seem to symbolically replace the distant home country. Only after a long process of acculturation and appropriation migrants usually get used to their new material environment; in many cases, the result is a hybrid mix of cultures.

The material environment thus forms an important frame for intercultural interactions, a frame which is only rarely an indifferent one. In most cases, it influences interactions through the “dominance of material structures” (Linde, 1972). This is true both for the macro-level of whole countries or cities and for the micro-level of concrete intercultural interactions; the latter ones can be affected strongly by, for example, the structure of offices or the furnishing of meeting rooms, by the order of chairs⁸ and tables for a negotiation, or by the choice of a restaurant for a lunch. The participants of such interactions are in many cases unaware of the relevance of these factors.

3. Objects as *media* of intercultural communication

I will deal only briefly with the modern media and technical instruments which facilitate not only intra-cultural communication, but are—on account of the worldwide transmission of information and of global communicative networks

⁶It is indicative that in many languages, one’s own people or country is defined by words derived from the world of dwelling and “home” (cf. *at home*, *domestic*, German *Einheimischer*, Swed. *inhemsk*, Turk. *yerlisi*), whereas strangers are often defined by their “mobile” material goods, usually by their costume (cf. kilt, Basque beret, fez, kimono, poncho) or by their food.

⁷On the process of cross-cultural adaptation see e.g., Kim (1995) and Casmir (1999, pp. 105f., 110).

⁸On the importance of (high) chairs for posture and sitting habits see Heller (1997, p. 250f).

—increasingly used for communication across cultural boundaries⁹. Print media such as books or pamphlets have for centuries carried messages also across cultural boundaries; translated literature was read and often circulated in oral form in many countries¹⁰, and popular prints with titles and texts in two or three languages were distributed almost globally already in the 19th century. The transmission of information through these media, however, is only one-directional and public, as are the electronic mass media such as radio and television.

Important as these mass media are for the diffusion of ideas and images, the focus of Intercultural Communication should be more on those technical media that enable people to communicate in two directions and privately, i.e., the telephone (and fax) and the PC with access to the Internet. For intercultural communication they have double significance, both as *media* that serve intercultural communication and often imprint their own communication styles on it, and as technical *devices* which require specific behaviors and attitudes. Experience shows that in the use of communication technologies and technical equipment there are significant cultural differences (cf. Bredin, 1996). To my knowledge, studies of telephone calls with partners from other cultures (which many people consider to be very stressful) and of the different ways of using the telephone are still missing.

4. The transmission (communication) of things

For thousands of years people have communicated with each other through the exchange of goods. Sailors, merchants, soldiers, and travelers have always brought home valuable foreign and exotic objects, and rulers have exchanged gifts. Cultures have influenced each other directly or indirectly through their products. Innovations that were adopted (and adapted) from other cultures have regularly caused culture change in the recipient cultures. In recent times, the industrial production, the abolition of trade barriers, and the globalization of the economy have given new dimensions to this “cross-cultural consumption”. Howes (1996, p. 2) refers to this recent change when he writes: “Given the accelerated pace and increased scope of world trade, it is now more normal for goods to cross borders than ever before”. In less and less cases material objects are the product and expression of only one culture, and more frequently, artifacts transcend cultural boundaries and enter different spheres of use and meaning. This transfer is achieved by the individual who brings back souvenirs from a journey or takes presents on a business trip; a comprehensive study of giving and taking gifts or bribes across cultural boundaries is still lacking,¹¹ although these are common practices in international business. Important as this individual exchange may be, the consequences of such processes as

⁹On the basic imbalances in the realm of international media and media communication cf. Delgado (1998) and Martin and Nakayama (1999, p. 10).

¹⁰On the problem of cultural translation and adaptation of literary and oral texts, cf. Roth (1998).

¹¹Here I can only refer to the theoretical studies of gift-giving such as Mauss (1967) or to practice-oriented works on gift-giving, bribery, and corruption such as Benfu (1978), Harris and Moran (1979, pp. 275–277, 422, 515f), Copeland and Griggs (1985, p. 105), and Kras (1988, pp. 12, 44).

cross-cultural production, international trade, world-wide distribution of media products, technology transfer as well as development aid and similar projects (e.g., in post-socialist eastern Europe), are much graver as they often reflect economic imbalances or even cultural imperialism. But again, the fact that artifacts cross cultural boundaries is largely ignored in the pertinent studies.

The expansion of international trade has additional relevance for intercultural communication through the fact that it has led to a significant increase in direct culture contacts. The sending abroad of thousands of managers and engineers, the growing number of people engaged in international trade and global marketing and advertising, and the massive international work migrations are some of the social consequences of economic globalization that reflect directly on intercultural communication.

Apart from studying the consequences of these culture contacts, Intercultural Communication should also pay attention to the problems resulting from the worldwide unification of industrial production and the “migration of goods” into many more cultures (cf. Appadurai, 1986, 1996). The global development of technology and the assimilation and availability of goods have yet another direct consequence for intercultural communication: they lead many people to believe that the similarity of material goods will by necessity result in the similarity or identity of their uses, their meanings, and their functions in all countries and cultures, and that it will eventually lead to a convergence of all cultures to a unified world culture. They will assert that everywhere on earth a car is a car, a video-recorder a video-recorder, a machine a machine, and that a person eating hamburgers at McDonald’s, drinking Coca-Cola, wearing blue jeans, and having a cellular telephone is undoubtedly a modern cosmopolitan.

However, this popular thesis of the “Coca-Colonization” or “McDonaldization” of the world (cf. Ritzer, 1993; Howes, 1996, p. 3f.) with a unified “world cuisine” (cf. Goody, 1997) is not corroborated by factual evidence. On the contrary, empirical data point to an increasing *localization* (Lindner, 1997; Watson, 1997) and above all *creolization* of material worlds (Howes, 1996, p. 5ff.). A closer look usually reveals that a complete international product identity is not very common and that in the different countries and cultures even identical products are used and integrated into everyday life in a variety of ways and can carry rather different values and meanings. Adaptation to local conditions, needs, and ideas is the rule.¹² This is true even for Coca-Cola, the icon of globalization and global distribution (cf. Miller, 1998b), and the ultra-modern technical instruments that are in some countries used for very traditional purposes which hardly correspond to the intentions of their producers. Howes (1996) and Miller (1998a) have presented many studies which demonstrate these processes of creolization, adaptation, and creative change of function, use, and meaning. These processes concern the use of both “western” technical products in the Third World and of the Third World products in the industrialized countries.

However, it is the visibility and tangibility of things that makes them quite attractive for everyday perception and for everyday theories, because, as the North

¹²See e.g., Kim’s (1992) study of the use of media in Korea and the US.

Americans say, “*seeing is believing*” (Bronner, 1986, p. 1–2). The consequences of this common attitude must be considered by Intercultural Communication, because the visible global assimilation and the (supposed) *lingua franca* of artifacts (and their worldwide dynamics) create unfavorable predispositions for intercultural interactions: they generate the expectation that the similarity or identity of the object world denotes similar or identical behaviors and values. This attitude (which is common particularly in the Western countries) which takes the visible surface for the essence and considers the technical world a “culture-free space” can become a serious barrier for the acceptance of otherness and for the adequate handling of cultural difference.

5. The relationship between humans and objects

The relationship between humans as cultural beings and the artifacts produced by them must therefore be of greatest concern for interculturalists. These relations are manifold, and they are mostly culture specific and therefore relevant for intercultural interactions. Already the form, the design, and the coloring not only of traditional objects, but also of modern industrial products is determined by local, ethnic or national styles and tastes, aesthetics and sense of color. In their production, marketing, and advertizing strategies, internationally operating companies take this fact into consideration and avoid product unification (cf. Mooij, 1997; Müller, & Kornmeier, 1995; Quack, 1995; Usunier & Walliser, 1993; Watson, 1997, p. 6–14).

Besides this, the forms of everyday use and care are culture-bound. Usually, as a part of their enculturation, individuals learn and gain appropriate practical knowledge about the functioning and functions of objects such as kitchen utensils and how to use and clean them, about the proper ingredients for a meal and the way of preparing and eating it, about the proper use of tools and technical instruments (cf. Fél & Hofer, 1969), about the cleaning of shoes or bicycles, etc. Apart from the practical knowledge and the skills they also acquire social knowledge about the meaning and value of things, and about norms of behavior and attitudes, attributes and taboos; the food taboos which are so important in some cultures are a case in point (Harris, 1997; Weinhold, 1997; Lindner, 1997).

But the relationship between humans and the object world extends to more fields, many of which are emotionally charged. Objects can be loaded with emotions if people have individual or collective ties to them, if groups or individuals identify with them or are identified with them by others. It goes without saying that for intercultural communication the *collective*, i.e., the cultural, ethnic, or national attributions and identifications are more important than the individual ones. Certain textiles or clothes (cf. Hendrickson, 1996), dishes (cf. Tolksdorf, 1993; Sandgruber, 1997), folk art objects (such as the Dalarna horse, cf. Rådström, 1992; Greverus, 1976), or the sauna (Tuomi-Nikula, 1997) are connected with specific peoples or nations in such an unambiguous way that they have shaped collective identities, ideologies, and myths. Despite growing internationalization of production, identities are still linked to “national” products (such as car brands); this can lead to the “commodification of national characteristics”, as Breidenbach (1994) has demon-

strated by the example of products “made in Germany”. The controversies in the European Union about Italian pasta, Dutch clogs, French champagne, and German beer (cf. Barlösius, 1997; Speckle, 2001) have shown the extent to which regional and national identities are tied to material culture and local cultures are used as counter-cultures to globalization (Lindner, 1997).

The relevance of these collective and individual man–object-relations for intercultural interactions becomes clear, for example, when expatriates or migrants are separated from their habitual object worlds for longer periods. The fact that many of them insist on taking their own furniture abroad and prefer their habitual food indicates the desire for familiar objects which convey security and identity. Emigrants stick to their familiar food for decades or even generations, a “conservatism of taste” that has been explained with the fact that taste and food habits are shaped in early childhood (Tolksdorf, 1976; cf. Levenstein, 1997). It is no contradiction that today people in many countries love to eat exotic food, because this food is almost exclusively limited to the exo-cuisine (of restaurants) and is usually selected and adapted to local tastes (cf. Tolksdorf, 1993; James, 1996).

6. Artifacts as *signs*: communicating through objects

While the use of artifacts as *objects* establishes a direct relation between people and objects, the use of artifacts as *symbols* establishes a communicative relationship between two or more human beings. The fact that everything can become a symbol naturally applies to all artifacts: Every day they are used as signals or symbols for the exchange of meanings and function as elements of implicit or explicit semiotic processes.¹³ The encoded messages, however, are not universal but culture specific and arbitrary. Due to the outward similarity or identity of artifacts this fact is often ignored; in intercultural interactions, this can lead to false attributions and to serious misunderstandings.

For intercultural communication it is useful to distinguish between two kinds of semiotic use of artifacts:

(a) On the one hand, objects are used as *quasi-verbal* communication and convey direct messages, i.e., serve as a signal, as an appeal or as a request for action. The structure of corridors and rooms or the position of the chairs around a table give clear signals to the participants in a business meeting where they have to go and where they must (and where they must not) sit down. The same is true for the cigarette or the vodka-glass offered to the business partner, or the tea-cup, the spittoon or the towel handed to the guest. Clear as these signals usually are for the native, they can be irritating for the foreigner: The filled vodka-glass can, apart from the invitation to drink, also imply a request to bring out a toast for the hosts that must not be denied; and the towel reached before or after the meal may have to be

¹³There is a wealth of literature on the symbolic use of objects; cf. Barthes (1980), Hawkes (1977), Burckhardt-Seebass (1983), and Christensen (1979).

regarded not so much as a courtesy but rather as a request to undergo a necessary cleansing ritual.

It is a specific—and very practical—variety of this kind of communication when photographs or drawings of objects are used as *iconic signs* in international communication; this is the case with the picture dictionary “Point It” (Graf, 1992) for travelers that follows the tradition of illustrated dictionaries.

(b) On the other hand, objects are used as *symbols* in communication processes. This exchange of material symbols between individuals or groups is common in all cultures. The high fence or the impressive facade, the Birkenstock sandals or the head scarf, the bouquet of flowers or the gift for the host, the place of honor for the guest or the dinner in a posh restaurant—they all carry meanings and inform the addressee about the prestige and status, political views and beliefs, about esteem or rejection, subordination or dominance, etc. A prerequisite for understanding these messages is, of course, the familiarity with the non-verbal codes in a given culture and the ability to decode the intended meanings. This ability is taken for granted within the same culture or social class, because both the sender and the recipient make use of a shared repertoire of signs and use the same “language of things”. If this is not the case, as e.g. in intercultural interactions, the intended meaning is not communicated or an unintended message is received and interpreted. The resulting false attributions and misunderstandings are often difficult to clarify because for the participants, the symbolism of objects is usually an unquestioned (and value-laden) matter-of-fact; diverging attributions of meaning are therefore felt to be strange or at least surprising.

A little example may demonstrate the symbolism of everyday objects. Underneath the protruding roofs of Alpine farmhouses one can often see firewood that is cut and piled much tidier than needed for the practical purpose. The farmers would do this “because of the people in the village”, since “as tidy as the piled wood the entire housekeeping will be”. The piled wood functions as a symbol for the social and cultural values of tidiness and order, and the natives will invariably “read” it in that way. In modern urban societies, one can find many analogous examples, as Veblen (1899), Bourdieu (1979), and Fussell (1983) have shown and as Humphrey (1997) has recently demonstrated for the new Russian elites and their extravagant villas.

The pressure to conform to norms and values in a conspicuous way is strong. The house front or the make of car, the casual dress or the dark business suit, the solid office furnishing or the flowers in the window—they all have in common that with their help someone wants to express his/her status, values or norms and to define the relationship to the addressee. In some areas, the size of the dung-hill in front of the farmhouse symbolized the wealth of the farmer, an example which highlights the conventional nature of the connection between object and meaning. What object represents what value and has what meaning in a given society or culture is subject to social convention. A stranger will unravel these hidden meanings only if he/she observes closely or asks knowledgeable natives. Each country and culture is replete with unexpected material symbols, i.e., with materialized values, ideas, and assumptions. Modern advertizing makes full use of them, as is shown by the advertizing for automobiles which differs a great deal from country to country.

In addition to that, traditional artifacts as well as modern industrial products can become symbols of whole societies or nations and can even serve the construction of national identities and the “invention of tradition” (Löfgren, 1995). To mention only a few examples: tartans and whisky unequivocally symbolize Scotland, clogs and Gouda cheese Holland, vodka and matryoshki Russia, leather breeches and Mercedes cars Germany, kimonos and Sony instruments Japan, and Coca-Cola and McDonald’s the United States. Such stereotypical “images in the head” are as numerous as they are popular in our age of increasing culture contact. For Intercultural Communication they are important insofar as for many people they constitute the only knowledge about the partner’s country which they bring into intercultural encounters. Their power must therefore not be underestimated.

7. Decoding messages: objects as *indicators*

As we have seen, not only language and behaviors but also material objects convey messages; to be able to decode them is important and can sometimes even be vital. The ability to observe the objects of everyday life and to detect the adequate ways to use them, and the norms and values that are built into them, in other words to read them as *indicators*, is a prerequisite for the management of everyday life. This ability is acquired in childhood, e.g., how to use sticks or fork and knife, and is extended later in life to many more objects, e.g., to new technical instruments whose use we usually master with relative ease, because we draw on our experience with similar objects.

While the *use* of unfamiliar objects (such as e.g. eating sticks or Turkish coffee pots) can be learned through experience, imitation or instruction, this is not so easy for the *values* and *norms* that are attached to the objects in another culture. The foreigner will get direct access to them only rarely because people are usually unaware of them. In most cases, they have to be inferred from circumstantial evidence, but the ability to adequately “read the things” of unknown material worlds must be learned. In many cases, this means that one has, at least partly, to suspend one’s own everyday knowledge and has to be sensitive to different sets of knowledge, logics of action, meanings of objects, and value attributions, and has to be willing to accept them. Experience has shown that this is a very serious problem for development programs and technology transfer (cf. Hermeking, 2001) which are usually based on Western experience and rationale (cf. Hess, 1995).

Teaching to understand the “language of things” of other cultures is therefore an important task for Intercultural Communication. For managing everyday life in a foreign country and for successful intercultural interactions one must be able to decipher the meanings encoded in the objects. The best method to achieve this is through the training of observation skills and an “ethnographic eye”, and of the ability to suspend one’s own unquestioned ideas and attributions.

Indicators can be found in the objects themselves, in their form, material or decoration, or in their number, order or position in space. In some areas of modern everyday life (such as hotels, department stores, airports), there is some kind of

international standardization of the material world. But even there not all uses and meanings can be inferred from the objects themselves in many cases, it is necessary to observe or to ask people who use them or even to let them demonstrate their use. A case in point are Japanese hotels for Japanese guests: to use them properly requires a fair amount of cultural know-how. Many Japan travel guides give detailed information on the furnishing of such hotels and private houses and how to behave in them; in the same manner, Japanese travel guides for Europe and North America give detailed instructions on how to use Western baths and toilets. Likewise, recent intercultural guides for businessmen and expatriates give instructions on the use and meaning of material objects and list the “dos and don’ts” for everyday life.¹⁴

The everyday knowledge (which is self-evident for the native) comprises the typical functions, uses, and behaviors. Elements of this emic knowledge about the use of things are, for example, how to set a table for an everyday or a festive meal, what dishes and courses are adequate, what colors match each other, what clothes fit together, what a “proper” wardrobe or a *liste de mariage* has to look like, how to ride a bicycle, how to hand over a present or a business card, how to furnish a living-room or an office, or what furniture to assign to what hierarchical level in a company. Material orders are thus indicators of concepts of social order and values. This concerns, for example, the location of the president’s office, the place for the guest, or the arrangement of tables in a restaurant.

The everyday knowledge finally extends to the ideological, religious, social, and cultural norms and values, the attitudes and basic assumptions which are imbued in the objects. They can differ greatly between cultures. To give only one example, the possession and use of objects can be guided either by the norm of parsimony derived from the concept of *limited goods*, or by the norm of waste and “built-in obsolescence” derived from the concept of *unlimited goods* (cf. Dundes, 1971). In either case, the possession of material goods has different meanings, a fact that is demonstrated, for example, by the different quantities and qualities of household chattels: Western households with tens of thousands of items contrast sharply with sparsely furnished households in Asia or Africa; Braudel and other authors explain this with the lower value attributed to material possessions (cf. Braudel, 1981). For a European company doing business in India this difference can become quite relevant when the question arises whether or not the local employees will be motivated or not by material incentives.

8. Conclusion

The material environment and the way it is used are indicators of social and aesthetic norms, of values, attitudes, basic assumptions, ideologies, and myths of a

¹⁴Cf. Business card etiquette (1998). International business resources on the WWW. Michigan State University Center for International Business Education and Research: ciber.bus.msu.edu/busres/channel/businesscard.htm.

society. The deciphering of these messages is difficult, though, because of the polyvalence of artifacts and their dependence upon context which are much greater than those of verbal messages. The meaning of objects can vary regionally and from one social class to another, and it can change in time: technical developments and fashions can render valued objects meaningless in a short time, and worldwide trade can replace indigenous material objects with imported ones. This rapid change contrasts, however, with amazing continuities in other areas such as food habits.

In a world which is characterized by the global production, marketing, and consumption of material goods, and by the rapid increase of culture contacts, it is important to foster a sensitivity for foreign material worlds. In view of this importance of material goods and intercultural contacts, the study of the material aspects of these culture contacts should become a prominent task both for Intercultural Communication and ethnology.

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