MEETING ON THE "NARROW RIDGE" IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE UFS

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an existential perspective on the possibilities of healthy intercultural communication in our communities where the participants share a common language such as English. While communication between different cultural groups is often problematic, it is argued that intercultural communication should ideally take the form of a meeting on the "narrow ridge" as the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) would say. The general implications of communicating on the "narrow ridge" are highlighted and contextualised within the communicative circumstances at the University of the Free State (UFS). Various modes of intercultural communicative interactions are referred to as well as the similarities and differences between Botho/Ubuntu and existential dialogue. The article concludes that an existential perspective on intercultural communication provides no instant solution, but that it does awaken us to our communicative responsibilities.

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INTRODUCTION

We are born in communication into this world with other people. We are born as individuals, acquire character and become persons (Park 1950: 250). Thinking of being a person might remind one of the Latin roots, namely persona signifying a mask worn by stage actors (Simpson 1969: 167). And as we live, often in a multicultural environment, we create elbow room for ourselves by employing verbal and non-verbal communication practices.

Many a textbook describes human communication as a process of message transmission and interpretation between a communicator and recipient with the aim of arriving at mutual understanding on a given subject-matter. Such a description of communication implies at least that it is a two-way process and that there is a rational motif behind the communicative interaction: that ideally-speaking appropriate evidence and reasoning are employed when communicating with fellow human beings. But we know that in communicating, we do not only use strict logic. Emotion and credibility are also in play.

It is unnecessary for the purposes here to delve into the so-called Aristotelian artistic proofs (Aristotle 1984: 24ff.) inherent in effective communication. However, as one argues out thoughts on the topic chosen, the triptych of rhetorical proofs entailing human logic, emotion and credibility (or *logos, pathos* and *ethos*) must in the end also be borne in mind.

Communication between different cultural groups is often problematic due to various variables, such as language, perceptions, values, prejudice and stereotypes (cf. Samovar & Porter 1995).

The concept of culture first denoted a noun of process - the culture (cultivation) of crops or (rearing and breeding) of animals – until it became in the late eighteenth century, especially in German and English, "a noun of configuration or generalization of the 'spirit' which informed the 'whole way of life' of a distinct people" (Williams 1981: 10).

The concept had evolved from the older emphasis on an "informing spirit" – ideal or religious or national – to a more modern emphasis on a "lived culture" which has been determined mainly by "designated social processes – usually particular kinds of political or economic order" (Williams 1981: 11).

Williams's (1983) social definition of culture is a useful frame of reference. For him, culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. Culture thus includes the values, activities and products of a relatively large human group through which it responds to its conditions of existence.

One will appreciate that a given (societal) culture may consist of various subcultures such as ethnic groups whose values, norms and/or symbols may not be shared by all members of the larger culture (cf. Gudykunst & Kim 1992).

AIM AND FRAMEWORK OF PROCEDURE

The aim of this article is to provide a different (existential) perspective on the possibilities of healthy intercultural communication in our communities where the parties in communication use a common language, such as English. To this end, the article will:

(1) Argue that intercultural communication should ideally take the form of a meeting on the "narrow ridge" as Martin Buber (1878-1965) would say.

(2) Highlight general implications of communicating on the "narrow ridge".

(3) Comment on the significance of the argumentation for the University of the Free State.

Communication is regarded first and foremost as a mode of existence, which represents an explicit existential view of communication.

In constructing, in a purposefully analytical and critical way, an existential communication perspective on the topic in question, the reader deserves the assurance from the outset that the article does not set out to resolve anything. Hopefully, however, it may help to kick-start the great debate once again.

Existentialism has a long history, but owes much of its modern (or nineteenth century) roots to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1815-1855). It became in the 20th century, especially on the continent of Europe, one of the major forms of philosophy. There are of course specific historical reasons for this. For our purposes, suffice it to say that existentialism or "philosophy of existence" has flourished in those countries where the social structures have been turned upside down and where previously established values have been questioned critically.

A basic characteristic of this style of philosophising (Macquarrie 1972: 2ff.) is that one begins with the person rather than nature (with the subject rather than the object). A person is not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. Themes such as freedom, decision and responsibility are prominent in existentialism, because these matters constitute the core of personal being. As Macquarrie (1972: 4) notes: "It is the exercise of freedom and the ability to shape the future that distinguishes man from all the other beings that we know on earth. It is through free and responsible decisions that man becomes authentically himself".

While existentialism has often been criticised for having an individualist bias, a few exponents such as Martin Buber (who is dealt with later on) have been pioneers in the investigation of interpersonal and intercultural relations.

The existential view of communication transcends the (functional) view of communication as a social activity, and holds that communication forms the centre of human existence. People are who they are in communication. Their existence is defined by their ability to remain in communication – not only with others within and outside their culture – as a prerequisite for any participation in the social or academic process,

but also with themselves as a source of genuine feelings and appreciations of their environments (Hardt 1972: 178).

It has been stated above that communication is a mode of existence, because it qualifies our existence, it tells something of our way of being. Therefore, the nature and quality of a person's existence will depend on the nature and quality of his or her communication, as manifested in specific forms of communication that he or she adopts, and which he or she adheres to predominantly.

MODES OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS

Communicologically-speaking one can enter into various kinds of communicative relationships with other human beings: be they family, friends, colleagues or learners.

Yoshikawa (1987: 320-321) suggests that there are essentially four modes of communication encounters in the intercultural setting:

- an ethnocentric mode

- a control mode

- a (Hegelian) dialectical mode, and

- the dialogical mode.

With the *ethnocentric* mode the one party in the communication process perceives the other only in his/her frame of reference. The other party's cultural uniqueness and/or differences are simply ignored. "Communication is one sided, and feedback is rendered ineffective by well-known psychological processes of selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention" (Yoshikawa 1987: 320).

With the *control* mode the one party is perceived and manipulated as an object to be exploited by the other party. Manipulative communication reigns supreme. Manipulation represents a distorted communicative relationship between the communicator and recipient. The so-called "relationship" is distorted in many ways, for example:

- the communicator plays a dominating and manipulatory role

- a subject-object relationship exists between communicator and recipient

- the communicator approaches the recipient as an object of experience and use

- the communicator attempts to create uniformity of thought in recipients by imposing directives that stifle the free expression of ideas and various possibilities of doing, and

- the communicator attempts to commit the recipient to decisions made on the initiative of the communicator, while he or she is left free of any commitment.

With the (Hegelian) *dialectical* mode, fusion-oriented communication is at play. Broadly speaking, with the (Hegelian) dialectical mode it is argued that thought proceeds by contradiction and the reconciliation of contradiction, the overall pattern being one of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Usually when one thesis meets another's antithesis a new synthesis may be created which is unique and transcends the differences of both parties. However, it may also happen that one party fuses into the other, losing his or her identity in the process.

With the *dialogical* mode of encounter, no fusion occurs. The one party remains separate and independent, but in an interdependent relationship with the other. As Yoshikawa (1987: 321) suggests, "the cultural integrity of A and B and the differences and similarities of A and B are recognized and respected. The emphasis is on wholeness, mutuality and the dynamic meeting of A and B. Even in their union, A and B each maintains a separate identity."

One of the foremost writers on dialogical unity which emphasises the act of meeting between two different beings without eliminating the otherness or uniqueness of each, is the Jewish philosopher and existentialist Martin Buber. It is to Martin Buber that we now turn.

BUBER'S SEEMING MODE OF EXISTENCE AND I – IT RELATION
Buber (1970) explains the nature of the relationships between people by describing two communication encounters: I – Thou and I – It. Each of these word-pairs creates and reveals a mode of existence.

For Buber the essential problem of being-with-others in communication is the duality of being and seeming, which constitute two different modes of existence: "The one (being) proceeds from what one really is, the other (seeming) from what one wishes to seem. In general the two are found mixed together. There have probably been few men who were entirely independent of the impression they made on others, while there has scarcely existed one who was exclusively determined by the impression made by him. We must be content to distinguish between men in whose essential attitude the one or the other predominates" (Buber 1965: 76).

Buber suggests that the seeming mode of existence or inauthentic being-with-others is characterised predominantly by an I-It relationship. According to Buber (1970: 53), a human being steps into the world and is present in it by uttering two primary word pairs: I -Thou or I -It . Note that the word "He" or "She" may take the place of "It". Each word pair represents a human being's specific attitude towards other humans and the world and also determines his or her specific relationship towards other humans and the world.

The difference between the I – Thou and I – It relations lie in the manner in which the "I's" relate themselves to other humans and the world, and not to the object to which the I relates (see Jansen 1985: 36). Thus one can have an I – Thou relationship with a dog.

When the I adopts an It-attitude, it is not an expression of his or her authentic self. He or she does not want to reveal him/herself, nor does he or she want to express him/herself in the communication encounter with the It.

The I – It relation points to a mere relation in which the It is passive. The I approaches the It as an object of experience and use – the I wants to manipulate the It – and the It allows itself to be experienced and used. Mutual participation and involvement between the participants are lacking (Jansen 1985: 35; Kohanski 1982: 20ff).

BUBER'S BEING MODE OF EXISTENCE, I – THOU RELATION AND WE COMMUNITY
The being mode of existence is representative of authentic being-with-others and is characterised mainly by an I – Thou relationship or dialogue.

In the I – Thou relation, the I reaches out to the Thou with his or her whole being, and the Thou responds with his or her whole being. Both reveal an openness towards each other, mutual respect and acceptance of each other so that both can actively participate in the building up of their relationship. I – Thou thus designates a relation between subject and subject, a relation of reciprocity and mutuality.

The I reaches out to the Thou from his or her own lived experience, that is, from his or her own solitude. Note that the I – Thou relationship cannot be sustained indefinitely and every Thou will at times become an It; through this objective knowledge is acquired and finds expression.

Intersubjectivity is implied in the I – Thou relationship; whoever the communicator may be, the recipient will be regarded as a subject in that relationship, which in turn provides for the essence of a relationship, reciprocity.

When the I and Thou meet, something happens between them. As soon as they meet, we are dealing with the interhuman realm. For Buber the unfolding of this realm implies dialogue (Buber 1965: 75; Jansen 1985: 36).

Dialogue is not mere conversation, but that which arises from a conversation, something extremely difficult to explain, and yet which is experienced as real: "The word that is spoken is found rather in the oscillating sphere between the persons, the sphere that I call 'the between'…We tend, to be sure, to forget that something can happen not merely 'to' us and 'in' us but also, in all reality, between us. Let us consider the most elementary of all facts of our intercourse with one another. The word that is spoken is uttered here and heard there, but its spokenness has its place in 'the between'" (Buber 1965: 112).

As Buber (1964: 37) suggests, genuine dialogue takes place when "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them". Note that the entering into a relation in the dialogic encounter is an act of the whole person, but it is an action which is never complete and must be repeated in every new situation.

Buber (1964: 213-215; 1965: 106-109) posits the existence of a community of several independent persons who have all chosen a life of dialogue (or authentic being-with-others), a community which he calls the We. The We is Buber's extension of the I – Thou to include more than two participants.

Buber's call for a We community, based on the dialogical principle, is one which is aimed at overcoming the dominance of the I – It world. Since the dialogical principle or authentic being-with-others is ontological, it is present, but needs to be brought to the forefront.

Buber (1964) uses the metaphor of a "narrow ridge" to describe the tenuous and uncertain nature of the we-relationship. The only certainty is that of encounter and undiscovered truth.

Meeting on the "narrow ridge" involves taking both our own and others' viewpoints into consideration in our dealings with others (Gudykunst & Kim 1992: 260). The participants in communication on the "narrow ridge" are almost like tightrope walkers. Balance is an overriding concern. Viewpoints must be considered with equal weight, if we are to meet on the "narrow ridge". Gudykunst and Kim (ibid.) suggest that "it is the dual concern for self and other in walking the narrow ridge that stops polarized communication and allows community to develop".

With his We community Buber thus sought a community based on genuine meeting which he maintained would provide an alternative to extreme individualism or collectivism. For Buber, individualism viewed man only in relation to himself, whereas collectivism could only view man as an aggregate.

In the place of dialogue, the prevalent mode of communication between individuals in contemporary society is what Buber (1964: 37) would call false dialogue or monologue. In false dialogue the participants do not really have each other in mind, there is no real turning to the other, no real desire to establish mutuality. In situations where people hold different points of view, each sees the other as the embodiment of a falsehood and him/herself as the embodiment of truth. There is thus a widespread insistence on only one point of view and the total rejection of all others.

In this situation there can be no meeting on the "narrow ridge" where truth and the meaning of life are discovered.

Ultimately, however, the decision to create reciprocal relationships, for example, to listen attentively to others, respect alternative points of view, reveal one's inner self, and affirm others as the selves that they are, remains the choice and responsibility of each individual.

BOTHO/UBUNTU AND EXISTENTIAL DIALOGUE

In an important document under discussion at the University of the Free State – the *Botho* initiative - it is noted that "in African philosophy and culture, human existence is defined – at an important level – by one's relationship with other fellow human

beings. In recent years this concept has been popularized as *Botho* (in Sesotho) or *Ubuntu* (in Nguni languages)" (The *Botho* initiative 2004: 3).

A rough translation in English of *ubuntu* would be "humane-ness towards others" (Ubuntu – internet). More specifically, *ubuntu* starts from the premise that "a person is a person through other persons" (Tutu 1999: 34). Dr Desmond Tutu (1999: 34-35) elaborates: "I am human because I belong, I participate, I share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good: for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished..."

Bhengu (1996: 8-9) provides the principles of *ubuntu* as described by J.K. Ngubane, scholar and staunch advocate of African heritage and an expert on *ubuntu* philosophy. According to Ngubane (in Bhengu ibid.) *ubuntu* "says" inter alia:

- we are unchanging equals

- my neighbour's sorrow is my sorrow; his/her joy is my joy

- allow no racism in your mind

- wealth must be shared, and

- no community has any right to prescribe destiny for other communities.

In short, *ubuntu* is a cultural way of being which emphasises values such as caring, respect, co-operation, warmth, sharing, communalism and collectivism (the *Botho* initiative 2004: 4).

While many of the prerequisites for engaging in existential dialogue are similar to those inherent in the wider concept of *ubuntu,* including respect for the other, reciprocity and commitment, the *ubuntu* principle that human identity is conceptualised in the first place as being a member of a group ("I am because we are") is foreign to Buber's idea of a genuine existential meeting between participants in the communication process.

The starting-points differ. As Le Baron (2004) points out, individual and communitarian identities are two quite different ways of being in the world. They coincide at some point, of course, since all groups are made up of individuals and concomitantly all individuals find themselves in relationship with various groups.

GENERAL IMPLICATIONS OF MEETING ON THE "NARROW RIDGE"

With existential dialogue, difference and otherness which are often conceived as problematic are viewed as positive factors and essential ingredients for growth.

In the sphere of the between each partner in communication allows the other to reach out. An element of surprise and curiosity is brought into the intercultural communication process.

With Buber's existential dialogue in mind, intercultural communication is viewed as a creative human act. There is dynamic interplay between participants where the major objective is to enter into a living mutual relationship with each other. Essential identities are retained. Both self and other awareness are facilitated. Meeting in the sphere of the between on the "narrow ridge" does not produce a homogeneous world, but rather creates a dynamic, diversified and pluralistic world.

One must remember that a movement towards dialogical communication establishes the overall proposition, the fundamental ethical basis of communication, that the human being is the means and mutual understanding the end. If such an ethical goal is absent, there can be no question of genuinely meeting in communication.

In Buber's We society or community there will still be indirectness, closedness and unapproachableness among human beings, but the commitment to turning to and meeting others as personal beings and to affirming one another in mutuality will predominate. In such a community then, one is not affirmed by oneself in a selfish way or by a collective to which one belongs.

In fostering dialogue, one must surely harken to reason and allow oneself to be guided by it. In using reason one is not neutral and disengaged; one is an active participant in the communication process. One uses reason for personal appropriation and (eventually) intersubjectivity purposes in the service of authentically being with others, because the existentialist realises that the fullness of human experience develops out of subjective thought and that the meaning of our lives can be diminished by a too narrow rationalism.

THOUGHTS ON COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS AT THE UFS

The University of the Free State (UFS) is of course a multicultural university where intercultural interactions take place daily – be it among colleagues or in lecturer-learner interactions. This workplace is task oriented where role play abounds and where masks are worn.

Each person at this institution lives his or her daily life as a private and public individual. Public individuals are confronted with the demands of the institution. Their time is spent pursuing all kinds of objectives. Everyone has a programme which they have to follow in the name of effectiveness and excellence. Everyone is so busy to put issues and agendas in place, especially in the transformational circumstance in which the University finds itself (cf. Fourie 2005: 2).

As Grobler and Puth (2002: 8) indicate, transformation implies really huge change... it is not enough to change strategies, structures and systems unless thought patterns which produced those strategies, structures and systems also change. These thought patterns are not merely politico-ideological in nature. They are also aimed at making change succeed in a pragmatic way.

The interactions among persons at the UFS are geared and structured mainly towards objective understanding which is required to keep this complex institution in place.

This arena is what Buber (1970) calls the It-district of institutions, as opposed to the I-district of feelings in one's personal life.

The UFS very often engages in technical dialogue in which causality predominates. Almost everything is caused and can, in turn, be a cause of something.

The pursuit and exercise of power among persons in general also tends to create a situation in which others are used as a means to an end within the concomitant framework that the end justifies the means.

The least that educators can achieve in such circumstances is to use the triptych of artistic proofs, namely *logos, patos* and *ethos,* artfully. The existence of the interdependence of logic, human emotions and credibility (consisting of expertness, trustworthiness and goodwill) must be solidified in our interpersonal and intercultural communication. But this is not nearly enough.

Academics must guard against false dialogue, a monologue disguised as dialogue. Jansen (1985: 38) correctly suggests that with such disguise the participants in the communication process approach each other:

> Only in general and abstract terms and not as persons in particular. They do not turn to each other and there is no desire to show mutually-involved participation... The recipient is merely fictional. He or she only exists to listen to the speaker. The speaker imposes his or her viewpoint on everyone and does not grant anyone else a viewpoint.

> Since true dialogue is absent in such a situation, the so-called participants do not confirm themselves or each other. Today we find merely an illusionary confirmation in a false contraposition, individualism versus collectivism. The individualist acts according to an arbitrary self will and consequently is coloured and conditioned fully by his or her circumstance. He/she is only seen in relation to him/herself. The collectivist on the other hand only acts by way of the collectivity and has lost the ability to respond from the depth of his/her own being. (Own translation.)

The UFS can only be a happy university when everyone in all strata (also of course at Vista and Qwaqwa) predominantly reach out to others – where people meet each other (in meaningful existential dialogical communication). Hereby possible negative culture-related perceptions, caused by the circulation of simplistic viewpoints, can perhaps change.

This does not mean that people should be uncritical towards each other. That everything should be believed. Suspicion is sometimes justified, but problems arise when suspicion becomes a norm of communication. When suspicion is always present, existential distrust prevails.

Masks are necessarily worn in public life – also to promote bureaucratic propaganda and, in certain cases, to sustain it - but this (the wearing of masks) must never reflect the overriding identity and/or image of the University.

There is nothing wrong in being honest with each other, as long as the honour or pride of the other person or persons is not wounded. The use of the free word must be approached circumspectly. The free word can cause major conflict.

Esterhuyse (2004: Perspektief 3) reminds us that they who use the free word to wound the honour of others actually shoot with words, and that they undermine the safety of persons in their group – and the future security of their group, one may add. Tolerance, mutual comprehension and outreach programmes are sources for healthy and sustainable intercultural relations (cf. Esterhuyse ibid.).

A we-community must be created at the UFS. In such a community real (existential) dialogue predominates where people reach out and meet each other on the "narrow ridge" with the aim of making self-actualisation possible for each and everyone. It is of course imperative that appropriate mindsets and hearts are sustained.

CONCLUSION
The existential perspective on intercultural communication provides no instant solutions for our existential problems, nor does it guarantee any fixed and certain results.

What it does, is to awaken us to our communicative responsibilities, also in intercultural encounters, and to remind us that the responsibility to make sense out of our experiences and circumstances here and now are firmly in our own hands.

With regard to the University, its task is much more that the training of learners who, empowered with specialised knowledge, can effectively fit into a profession in our multicultural technological society.

The University must in the end also fulfil the promise of being a spiritual power out to ensure healthy intercultural relations through communication.

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