



Hans-Georg Wolf & Frank Polzenhagen

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A Cognitive Linguistic Focus on Neglected Issues**

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Universität Duisburg-Essen

Hans-Georg Wolf & Frank Polzenhagen

University of Hong Kong (China)

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Abstract

So far, academic interest in intercultural communication has largely ignored the fact that much if not most of these interactions go on in second and foreign language varieties (cf. Kachru 1994: 13), and, specifically, the role of English as a lingua franca (House 1999: 74). This neglect is not the only shortcoming of studies of intercultural communication; another problem is an undue theoretical restriction in functionalist pragmatic approaches which excludes crucial aspects of the category “culture”, on the grounds that they lie outside of the scope of linguistic pragmatics (see, e.g., Blommaert 1991). To our minds, Cognitive Linguistics, and Cognitive Sociolinguistics (see Kristiansen & Dirven 2006fc.) in particular, have much to contribute to overcome these limitations. So the aim and scope of our paper are as follows: First, we will discuss the implications of the use of English in intercultural communication against the backdrop of current debates in the field of world Englishes. Following this short discussion, we will present the results of studies involving L2-speakers from different cultural backgrounds that highlight differences in conceptualizations pertaining to the domain(s) of age and family. We will argue that these differences are likely to result in intercultural incomprehension or misunderstanding (in a wide sense). Abstracting from this cognitive-pragmatic level, we will then use our examples to highlight the insufficiencies of mere functionalism, and to demonstrate that Cognitive Linguistics, with its semantic and conceptual orientation, can enhance our *understanding* of the different cultures of speakers engaged in IC. Finally, at the metatheoretical level, we will point out that the application of cognitive linguistic methods to the study of IC entails a further recognition of hermeneutics in Cognitive Linguistics (cf. Geeraerts 1992).

Keywords: Intercultural communication; functionalist pragmatics; relativism; cultural models; native and non-native varieties of English; Hong Kong English; conceptual metaphor; meaning-oriented pragmatics; hermeneutics

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is a reality for many people around the world, be it in the context of tourism, or in private and business encounters. Several academic disciplines are increasingly paying tribute to this fact, and this topic lends itself to interdisciplinary research (see Blommaert 1991: 13). For example, intercultural communication is of interest to anthropology, social psychology, pedagogy, business and economics, and, last but not least, to linguistic pragmatics. A fundamental question for the latter, as for any of the other sciences involved, is if and how it meets this interdisciplinary challenge.

In linguistic pragmatics, the discussion of “intercultural communication” arguably has been dominated by linguists with a particular theoretical orientation towards functional pragmatics. First, we will critically review some of its basic assumptions and limitations, and critically reflect on variables involved in the study of intercultural communication. Then we will pay tribute to the fact that a great part, if not most of intercultural communication in English takes place in non-native varieties (cf. Kachru 1994: 13). This constellation of ‘intercultural communication’ and ‘non-native language varieties of English’ involves different fields of linguistic research and touches upon fundamental metatheoretical assumptions. The theoretical challenge here is to come to terms with the way “culture” is expressed in English and to shed light on the pragmatic consequences of conceptual differences between speakers of first and second language varieties of English. We suggest that the application of methods developed in Cognitive Linguistics, or, more specifically, in Cognitive Sociolinguistics, a) can overcome the shortcomings of the dominant view of pragmatics and b) can contribute to a better understanding in intercultural encounters by revealing conceptual differences. To provide examples, we concentrate on diverging expressions and conceptualizations pertaining to the domain(s) of family and age in Hong Kong English and Western-based varieties of English.

2. Intercultural Communication in the Framework of ‘Linguistic Pragmatics’

Linguistic pragmatics is a heterogeneous and hard-to-define field; theoretical orientations range from a methodological restriction and a leaning on ‘core linguistics’ on the one hand and theoretical and methodological openness on the other hand (see Wierzbicka 1991: 18-19, Verschueren 1999: 260-263). Wierzbicka’s (1991: 19) suggests to delimit the field and to speak of two pragmatics, a “linguistic pragmatics,” which has to be methodologically coherent and should orient itself towards ‘core linguistics’ and a description of linguistic competence, and “another pragmatics or other pragmatics,” which, according to her, is the domain “of the sociologist, the psychologist, the ethnomethodologist, the literary scholar,” etc. Yet such a narrow view of linguistic pragmatics precludes interdisciplinary approaches, especially with respect to intercultural communication (cf. Blommaert 1991: 13, Verschueren 1999: 6-8). How could, for example, the cultural dimension be integrated

without recourse to the neighboring sciences? How could, in turn, the more narrowly linguistic discipline be made fruitful and applicable to the other social sciences? Thus from our point of view, linguistic pragmatics has to remain an open and heterogeneous field (cf. Caffi 1998: 581), and ‘pragmatics’ (from now on also used for linguistic pragmatics) could be a cover-all term for a variety of approaches within linguistics and beyond.

The definition of pragmatics as “a general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation their usage in forms of behaviour,” as offered by Verschueren (1999: 7, also Verschueren, Östmann & Blommaert 1995: ix) may count as fairly representative of the currently dominant view of the field. In this functional understanding, the concern of pragmatics is the investigation of observable communicative behavior and successful communicative functioning (cf. Blommaert & Verschueren 1991). Successful communication then basically consists of two things: communicative behavior appropriate to some communicative context, norm or rule, and the reaching of some communicative goal. This paradigm has been mapped onto the pragmatics of intercultural communication, and numerous studies are available now that document and analyze, for instance, variation in the exercise of speech acts or formulaic routines, as, e.g., the non-existence of German “guten Appetit” in varieties of English, the use of direct and indirect speech acts, the expression and perception of politeness and face, conversational maxims, variation in the organization of discourse, addresses, small talk, linguistic means of expressing respect, the negotiation of meaning, and the solution of communicative disturbances due to intercultural differences in verbal interactions.¹ Studies along these lines capture important aspects of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variation. They have led to a differentiated view of intercultural communication and have made it clear that pragmatic rules, principles, and maxims can only be defined relative to the respective cultural context (see Clyne 1998: 250, 1994: 3).

While this type of functional analysis has its merits, it bypasses, as a general rule, fundamental issues of intercultural communication. Its focus is on “observable linguistic behavior” and the “effective functioning” of the communication process itself. This, we believe, confuses, to some degree, the means with the goals, as appropriate linguistic behavior should be auxiliary to the higher aim of coming to an understanding of the other person, the other culture. Questions that arise (not only) for linguists are: Which stance is taken towards linguistic relativism and is it realized as a problem in the first place; to which degree are “misunderstandings” in intercultural encounters (cf. House 1999; for a classification of misunderstandings see Hinnenkamp 1999: 2-3) attributable to discursive behavior on the linguistic surface and to which degree to differences in the interactants’ culture-specific conceptualizations; can these misunderstandings ever be resolved, and what

1 For examples, see, e.g., the case studies in Kiesling & Paulston’s (2005) reader. For an analysis following these lines with a special attention to Hong Kong, see, e.g., Cheng (2003) and Scollon & Scollon (2001), which combines the functional concern with a discourse approach and ethnography.

is the basis for comparison (e.g., *a priori* assumed universal categories); how is the relation between language and thought to be seen? In our perception, the functionalist paradigm fails to adequately address these fundamental questions. The scope of these approaches is limited to the “how” of verbal encounters and brackets the “why.” Specifically, it has difficulties coming to terms, both in theory and application, with the often diverging cultural conceptualizations of the interactants and the impact of this divergence on intercultural understanding.

One deeper cause of this restriction, at the theoretical level, is the place the notion ‘culture’ is actually granted in the functionally oriented accounts of intercultural pragmatics, the programmatic commitment to an interdisciplinary approach notwithstanding. As Blommaert (1991: 22) at first aptly states, “when two individuals with a different cultural background meet, two different sets of concepts, categories, customs, routines and presuppositions are involved.” He is right with his view that besides situation-specific cultural elements in the interaction, an *a priori* ‘ethnic habitus’ (in the sense of Bourdieu) of the participants exists. Therefore, so Blommaert (1991: 26), a number of findings “would point towards fundamental cultural categories and concepts ... which hold true for the whole speech community to which the interlocutors belong.” Given this fully agreeable argument, it is an unnecessary theoretical restriction when Blommaert (1991: 23) also postulates that “the object of the study of intercultural communication is not the culture-specific categories ... but the way in which these categories etc. contribute to the construction of a situation-dependent consensus” (also see Scollon & Scollon 2001: 12-14 for a related deliberate restriction). In other words: the problem of diverging cultural conceptualizations is acknowledged and recognized, yet its full exploration is simultaneously restricted on methodological grounds. In fact, integral aspects of the cultural dimension of language are thus *a priori* and deliberately excluded from the study of intercultural pragmatics and delegated elsewhere. According to Blommaert (1991: 27) it is, for instance, the task of anthropology to clarify the ethnic *habitus*. Excluding culture-specific categories this way would mean that in every study they need to be either presupposed, which obviously runs the risk of introducing stereotypical preconceptions, or an investigation of them would have to precede any specific pragmatic study of intercultural communication. Yet why not use linguistic examples from speakers of different cultural backgrounds and analyze them, for instance, with the tools cognitive-cultural approaches to linguistics provide, in order to at least get a partial glimpse of the structures of the culture-specific categories involved? Notions like “cultural model,” “folk model,” and “cultural schema” may be and have been fruitfully applied to analyses at various levels of linguistic inquiry (see Dirven, Wolf & Polzenhagen 2006fc. for an overview; and also Palmer 1996), and deliberately excluding them deprives the study of intercultural pragmatics of a rich analytical tool.

As a part of the above theoretical restriction, there is, in functionally orientated approaches, a noticeable skepticism of accepting inter-individual cultural conceptualizations at group level as a valid parameter of linguistic-pragmatic analysis. Scollon & Scollon (2001: 14) seem to be guided by this skepticism when they state that in their book they “set aside – not as unimportant but rather as not directly relevant – aspects of cultural, group, or social differences that are not directly involved in social interactions between members of different groups” and that their emphasis “is on people in social interaction with each other, not upon abstract or independently conceived differences between members of different groups.” This focus crystallizes in their distinction between studies of “cross-cultural communication,” in which different systems are compared, and studies of “intercultural communication,” which analyze direct interaction (Scollon & Scollon 2001: 12-13). The argument goes that the former “does not directly come to grips with what happens when people are actually communicating across the boundaries of social groups” and that “in many situations some aspects of so-called cultural differences are of no relevance at all whereas other aspects that might be thought extremely minor might assume central importance.” (Scollon & Scollon 2001: 13-14).² Yet this also applies to the culture-specific or language-specific discursive or pragmatic norms and rules on which the functional approach is focussed and based, prior to analysis. If and how they are eventually followed is a matter of each individual talk exchange. Also, their violation does not necessarily lead to the failure or disturbance of a particular communicative event, and their pursuance does not guarantee successful communication beyond, maybe, mere effective functioning. Likewise, the analysis of the actual impact of cultural conceptualizations on an intercultural encounter requires prior assumptions about the cultural models of the participants. Verschueren (2003: 8) argues against taking groups seriously as a locus of culture, on the grounds that this “amounts to giving in to stereotyping and homogenization.” In the same vein, he questions culture as a “social-world correlate to linguistic choices” and warns against a pre-theoretic reification or even mythologizing of culture in linguistic analyses (Verschueren 1999: 92). According to him, “a truly pragmatic approach to linguistic behavior does not place social variability at the level of idealized groups, but along a range of intersecting dimensions contributing to interlocutors’ *social identities*” (his italics).³ We take issue with this view on several grounds. First of all, it reduces variability to the level of the individual. This deliberate restriction, we feel, is also at odds with Verschueren’s (2003: 7) own statement –

2 Note, however, that Scollon & Scollon (2001) explicitly include, in their analysis, dimensions like world-view, ideology, and kinship models, i.e. the aspects that our own approach seeks to foreground.

3 The cultural dimensions he deems relevant “include the contrast between oral and literate societies, rural versus urban patterns of life, or a mainstream versus a sub-cultural environment,” and social dimensions like “social class, ethnicity and race, nationality, linguistic group, religion, age, level of education, profession, kinship, gender” (Verschueren 1999: 92). Yet he misses a) that these “social identities” are reifications as well, and b) that these dimensions are, to a high degree, culturally defined (what, for example, is ethnicity other than a cultural category?). Again, the conceptual level, where culturally relevant categorizations are made, is completely disregarded.

with which we agree – that “just as social structures and dynamics are processed by individual minds, *many seemingly individual processes require a social level of ‘distributed cognition’ in order to ‘work’*” (our emphasis). This level of ‘distributed cognition’ cannot be bypassed in the study of intercultural communication. Again, cultural-model research since Quinn & Holland (1987) lends itself for application, with key notions like that of ‘distributed representation’ (Sharifian 2003). Furthermore, group-specific conceptualizations, whether or not they are shared by an individual member, bear on communication directly and in various ways. Specifically, they influence linguistic choices, for instance via entrenched linguistic expressions they yield (see Polzenhagen & Wolf 2006fc. and Wolf & Polzenhagen 2006fc. for examples from African English). While we agree that due caution is at place in order to avoid cultural stereotyping and essentialism, we thus do not accept the view that a pragmatic approach should exclude the recognition of cultural conceptualizations at group level.

As stated above, we are not arguing against the usefulness or legitimacy of functional approaches to the analysis of intercultural encounters.⁴ However, our point is that this focus is much too narrow if intercultural *understanding* is to be achieved. From a functional perspective, the ultimate aim in intercultural encounters is effective functioning, while it remains an open question what ‘effective functioning’ is.⁵ Yet a truly interdisciplinary understanding of pragmatics should not only see intercultural encounters in the light of successful functioning of the partners in a microscopic communicative situation, but also with respect to the understanding or misunderstanding of the cultures involved (cf. Blommaert 1991: 26). In other words, a hermeneutic dimension has to be recognized. It does not suffice to see problems of intercultural communication as a question of variability and to reduce them to “a lack of attention for ... the pervasiveness of variability” (Verschueren 1999: 228). Since hermeneutics has to do with meaning, the issue is to strengthen the semantic component in a theory of intercultural communication, which has been neglected in pragmatics so far (cf. Clyne 1994: 3). For this reason, we strongly agree with Clyne’s (1998: 250, 1994: 3) demand for an analysis of underlying cultural value-systems and Caffi’s (1998: 583-584) call for a conceptual-lexical approach.

4 Note, however, the danger of a reductive functionalism. The narrow line between a theoretically more open functionalism and a reductive functionalism, if not Darwinism, becomes clear when one compares the following two statements by Verschueren: In Verschueren (1999: 8), the question underlying the functionalist approach reads “how does language function in the life of human beings,” while in Verschueren (1987: 39) it is posed as “what and how does language contribute to human survival”. In the latter, the notion of adaptability is explicitly placed in the context of Darwin’s theory (Verschueren 1987: ch.1). If one looks at this philosophically rather restricted understanding of pragmatics, not much is left for openness and interdisciplinarity. In the *Handbook of Pragmatics*, Verschueren (1995:13-13) admits a functionalist bias; though he tries, we find unsuccessfully, to distinguish his kind of functionalism from the functionalist approach in the social sciences by paying lip service to an “interpretive” perspective.

5 In this sense, the approach represented by Blommaert and Verschueren is hardly different from the intercultural training programs criticized by Blommaert (1991: 18-21).

3. Metatheoretical Problems of Intercultural Communication

A crucial problem, which pragmatics of intercultural communication has to deal with, and which has already been hinted at in the previous section, is that of relativism. Since this is a fundamental and widely discussed philosophical problem, only a few aspects which are immediately relevant to the topic in question can be addressed here. Possibly the complexity of this problem is one reason for not mentioning the difficulties which result from it for the study of intercultural communication in many works on this topic. Still, if one talks about different cultures, it is inevitable to deal with relativism on two interrelated levels. First the level of theory formation, and here, in particular, the question if relativism is realized as a problem in the first place,⁶ and the question if cultural differences in the conceptual systems are accounted for by a theoretical model. With respect to the latter question, we have argued that it is not adequately addressed by the currently dominant approaches to intercultural communication, since many of the relevant issues are deliberately excluded from their scope. The other level concerns the act of intercultural communication itself and what is considered to be successful communication. Here we observed a similar limitation of the functionalist approach. Its scope is on appropriate linguistic behavior and the, in our perception, higher aim of coming to an understanding of the other person, the other culture is scarcely addressed. The functionalist approach is largely mute on such fundamental questions whether an understanding of a different culture is possible at all, how far this understanding goes, and which role language plays in this.

First, a few further remarks concerning the theoretical level (without picking up on all issues): To have a framework for comparison at all, pragmatic works often assume universally valid pragmatic principles of interaction, as, e.g., face, distance, indirectness, solidarity, intimacy, formality, politeness, etc. As Wierzbicka (1991: 6) rightly remarks, these labels are not or only circularly and obscurely defined. To present a self-chosen example, we could take Brown & Levinson's (e.g., 1998) well-known studies of politeness. "Positive politeness" is characterized as an expression of solidarity (Brown & Levinson 1998: 489). Politeness thereby is related to "face" ("self-esteem"). Face, in turn, is defined as "a highly abstract concept, which consists of two specific kinds of desires ('face-wants') attributed by interactants to one another: the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative face) and the desire (in some respects) to be approve of (positive face)." This assumption are supposed to be universally valid (Brown & Levinson 1998: 500). In this kind of language game one obscure concept defines another one. Furthermore, this approach is ethnocentric, because it uses concepts and the accompanying terms which stem from a Western, psychologistic discourse. This becomes evident when Brown & Levinson (1998:500) refer to the face-wants of an Apache. These concepts may have some validity to people who have been exposed to this kind of discourse, but mapping these explanations on

6 For a discussion of objectivism in pragmatics, see Schneider (1991).

a different culture reminds one of the inadequacy to explain an Haitian case of spirit possession as some form of neurotic disturbance (see Berger & Luckmann 1966: 196-200, and also Gergen 1994: 73-75). Wierzbicka (1991: 6) is right again when she says that these kinds of definitions are language-specific – we should perhaps better say ‘culture-specific’ – and do not offer a language-independent, universal perspective on the expression of meaning. Yet it is questionable if there is a language-independent perspective at all: so one can hardly agree with Wierzbicka’s search for a neutral meta-language with universal concepts. Apart from that, the application of the terms just cited are quite negotiable, a freedom Gergen (1985) has called the “pandemonium principle”: a speech act could be defined as an act of politeness or of submissiveness, for example, (or as something else), depending on the point of view and rhetorical skill of the observer.

Maybe pragmatic universals do not go further than the principles typologized by Du Bois (1998: 713-714), namely first, that all languages have pragmatic principles, second that there is a dimension of context (“pragmatic space”), and third, that pragmatic principles are brought into linguistic structure through grammaticalization (also see Palmer 1996: 191-193)

Besides difficulties with universal pragmatic principles there are also theoretical problems on the conceptual level. The challenge here is that there is no culturally neutral basis from which we can describe and compare cultures – or rather: the conceptual systems of speakers from different cultures (cf. Blommaert 1991: 28; Wierzbicka 1991: 9). Our own conceptualization will always influence our view of “the other.” Yet this is a general philosophical problem, and does not only apply to the understanding of people from different cultures. “Shared knowledge,” without which communication is hardly possible, thus is not an innocent notion (cf. Verschueren 1991: 194).

4. Intercultural Communication in English and the Notion of ‘Culture’

The intercultural approaches within the paradigm “pragmatics of communicative behavior,” to call it like this, are limited in yet another way: pragmatic rules, which exist in the individual languages, are detached from the framework of discourse and contrasted with each other (cf. Clyne 1998: 245). What is eclipsed is the sociolinguistic fact that a considerable, if not the major part of actual intercultural discourse takes place in English. As House (1999: 74) has rightly noted, “studies of intercultural communication in the scientific community have practically ignored EFL [English as lingua franca] interactions.” Until the 90s, research did not go beyond mainly studying the contrast between the pragmatic rules of English and a small number of languages (cf. Clyne 1998: 246). While now an increasing amount of languages is being considered for comparative analysis, scarce attention has been paid so far to the pragmatics of varieties of one language which are rooted in different socio-cultural settings. With its various native and second-language varieties, English is the case *par excellence* in this respect, and the present dominant role of this language in

intercultural communication world-wide calls for a systematic consideration of cross-varietal differences at this level of analysis. The specific challenge here is that the same linguistic surface material may have quite different conventional pragmatic effects or “meanings” for speakers of different varieties.⁷ English studies, sociolinguistics, pedagogy and TESOL are increasingly making this fact the center of their theoretic considerations (see, e.g., the collection of articles in Garcia & Otheguy 1989; Alatis 1994; Gnutzmann 1999).

If it is the case that a second or third language is the medium for intercultural encounters, then further differentiation and theoretic positioning are necessary. With respect to the English language, the concept of “linguistic imperialism” is loudly propagated, where English is viewed as a “killer language” (see, e.g., Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 2001, 1999; and, for a critical discussion, Lucko 2003; House 2003; and Polzenhagen & Dirven 2006fc.). Killer language in the sense that English extinguishes the indigenous cultures where it spreads globally. This view assumes that a language is always tied to one culture alone. If its proponents were right, problems of intercultural communication would diminish proportionally to the spread of English in the world. If everyone spoke English, everyone would share the same cultural reference-system; culture-based cognitive differences would no longer exist.

Those who espouse the killer-language view usually neither consider the influence of the mother tongue nor the fact that different cultural models can be expressed in English as a second language (see, e.g., Wolf 2001; Wolf & Simo Bobda 2001; Polzenhagen & Wolf 2006fc.). If one accepts the more realistic view that English is not identical with Western culture of an Anglo-Saxon kind, a number of problems relating to intercultural communication has to be tackled by researchers, which we can only briefly sketch here: What are the differences and how do they find expression in the English language, which pragmatic abilities and norms have to be taught in TESOL, which balance has to be maintained thereby between the intranational and the international functions of English, and, finally, what exactly is “intercultural competence” (House 1999: 86; Gnutzmann 1999: 165-167) or “intercultural communicative competence” (Doyé 1999: 94-95; Song-Mei 2002: 96) in second language education?

To avoid intercultural “problems,” some proponents of an “International English” call for a reduction, if not deletion of culture-specific elements in such an idealized variety (see, e.g. Yano 2001), yet neglect that the lexico-semantic range they suggest for it is

7 Consider, as an illustration, the following example reported by Skandera (2003: 149-150, 204): In Kenyan English, the conventional expression *not mind*, as in “I would not mind”, is typically used to express a strong desire or to readily and gratefully accept an offer or invitation. By a native speaker of English, this item is likely to be interpreted as signaling indifference, a discrepancy which may evidently effect mutual understanding and impede successful communication. This and similar instances may be readily accounted for in a functional approach. Other dimensions of variation, namely those that involve different underlying cultural conceptualizations, however, may not (see Wolf & Polzenhagen 2006fc. and Polzenhagen & Wolf 2006fc. for examples from African English).

representative of a Western and modernist discourse. Others are aware of the latter implication, and explicitly base “International English” on the culture of the “global village” (see, e.g., Johnson 1990). Apart from the odd question how the background culture can be excluded at all and on which basis this should be feasible, both strands completely miss the point that intercultural communication should be concerned with broadening the cultural horizon of individual speakers by the exposure to hitherto unknown words and concepts, not with deliberately restricting it. In more recent approaches to English language teaching, too, a shift to a positive stance towards the cultural dimension of language and its explicit recognition in training programs is noticeable (e.g. Willems 2002).

As to the notion of ‘culture’ itself, it should not be too specifically defined. Culture, understood as a particular view of reality as shared by a group of people, is necessarily contingent upon political, sociological, historical and geographical categories. Therefore, one does not have to distinguish between “small cultures” and “large cultures” (cf. Bowers 1999: 221-222). One could, for example, speak of a sub-Saharan African culture, a family culture, a youth culture, or a national culture, and some of these classifications are similarly vague as the category culture itself. In turn, often assumed cultural traits determine these classifications, as in the case of a Europe and a European culture (and it is an open question if this includes or excludes Turkey, to name a concrete example which is heavily debated in Europe). Thus, besides vagueness, there is circularity.

If gender is taken as a social category of cultural distinction, communication between men and women would be a case of intercultural communication. Indeed, some feminist linguists claim that there is an authentic female culture, which showed in language use (cf. Cameron 1995: 193-195). In the literature, however, intercultural communication is mostly understood as communication across national boundaries but also across broader regional cultures. Bowers (1999: 222-223), for example, distinguishes between a “national” (e.g., a British, German or Malayan), an “international” (e.g., European, Latin-American, (East)Asian) and a “transnational” (e.g., academic, business or youth) cultural level. If one wants to go by these distinctions, our scope and examples could thus be placed on the international level.

5. Age, Family and Ancestors in Hong Kong English and Western-Based Varieties of English – Examples of Intercultural Differences

Our starting point is findings from a study on the Hong Kong English (ICE-HK) corpus of the International Corpus of English project by Bolton & Wolf (*in prep.*). Bolton and Wolf looked at cultural keywords and culture-specific conceptualizations pertaining to the domains of family and money in the ICE-HK as compared to the British English component (ICE-GB).⁸ They found that items like *family, sister, brother, papa, relative, parent, mama,*

⁸ See Bolton & Wolf (*in prep.*) for further information concerning the corpora, the methodology, and the notion of ‘cultural keyword.’

mother, eldest, clan, grandma, granny, great-grandfather appear as keywords in the ICE-HK, i.e., are significantly more frequent in it than in the ICE-GB. Furthermore, they discovered collocations in the ICE-HK which cannot be found or occur less frequently in the ICE-GB, namely collocations of *ancestor(s)* with, inter alia, *people, family, offer, temple, worship, worshippers, and respects*. From a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective – in which the use of computer corpora are specifically called for (see Geeraerts 2003) – collocational patterns are indicators of parallel conceptual activation patterns (Wolf & Polzenhagen 2006fc.). The findings of Bolton and Wolf cannot be reviewed in detail here. Nevertheless, they prompted us to further explore some of the differences that were revealed from the angle of intercultural communication. For that purpose, we set up a questionnaire study, in which students from Hong Kong and Germany participated. We are of course aware that the English spoken by German students cannot be taken as isomorphic with the British English of the ICE-GB. Still, the expectation of cultural differences between Hongkongers and Germans on the one hand, and certain cultural similarities between Germans and British on the other is a legitimate one. Furthermore, the German – Hong Kong constellation has the advantage that it compares two non-native varieties (bearing in mind, however, the different status of English as a foreign language and a second language, respectively).

50 questionnaires (see the appendix for the format of the questionnaire) were distributed to a class of Cantonese students at The University of Hong Kong, and 50 identical one to German students at Humboldt University, Berlin. 39 questionnaires were returned from the Hong Kong students, and, unfortunately, only 19 from the Germans. The aim of this survey was to highlight cultural patterns of conceptualization and to confirm and further elaborate on prior corpus findings – which fully conform to standards of quantitative data analysis – and hence the questionnaire not geared towards eliciting positivistic statistical figures; a good part of it called for open answers. Hence, even though there is a discrepancy between the number of the responses from the two groups, the findings are still conclusive and useful for our purpose.

In our discussion of the questionnaire data, we will first concentrate on two of the concepts that were tested, FAMILY and AGE, and some aspects of the conceptual network they are embedded in. Finally, we will take a more detailed look at the ANCESTOR concept.

In the first question of the part testing the AGE concept, the students were presented with 18 keywords chosen from the findings on the ICE-HK and asked to indicate seven of them which they associate most with AGE. The rationale underlying this question was to determine which concepts are, relative to others, strongly linked to AGE. Figure 1 shows some of the results.

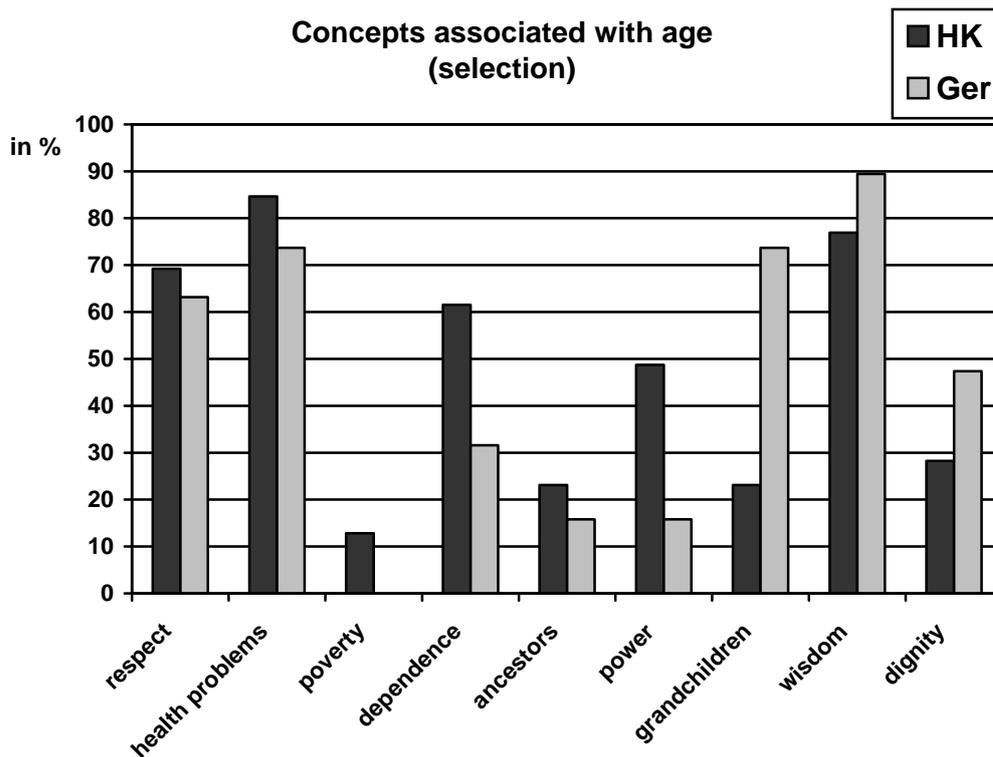


Figure 1.

No major differences emerged for keywords like *respect*, *health problems*, *wisdom*, which were found to be strongly associated with AGE in both groups. Other keywords, however, yielded significantly different outcomes for the German and the Hong Kong groups. For instance, for the Hong Kong group, *dependence* and *power* were found to be strongly associated with AGE, while they received minor scores in the German group. In turn, the keyword *grandchildren* was rated as a highly prominent associate of AGE by the Germans, yet was of relatively minor importance to the Hong Kong group.

Further insights come from the second question of this part, where the students were asked to indicate the degree of strength they perceive between AGE and the 18 keywords individually. Here, the picture on some of the differences observed for the first question emerged even more clearly, e.g. as regards the link between age and power (figure 2):

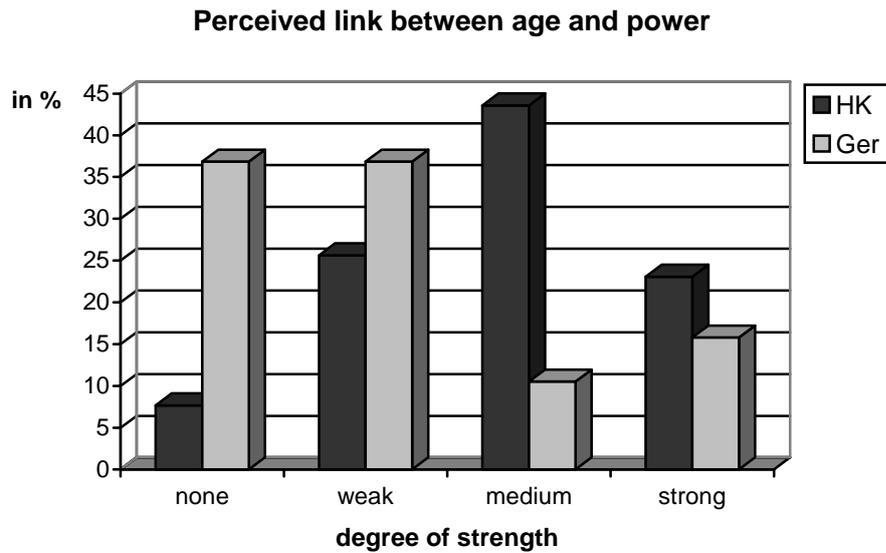


Figure 2.

Other links received fully parallel scores in the two groups, e.g. the one between *age* and *respect*, which has already been found to be equally prominent for both groups in the first question (cf. figure 1):

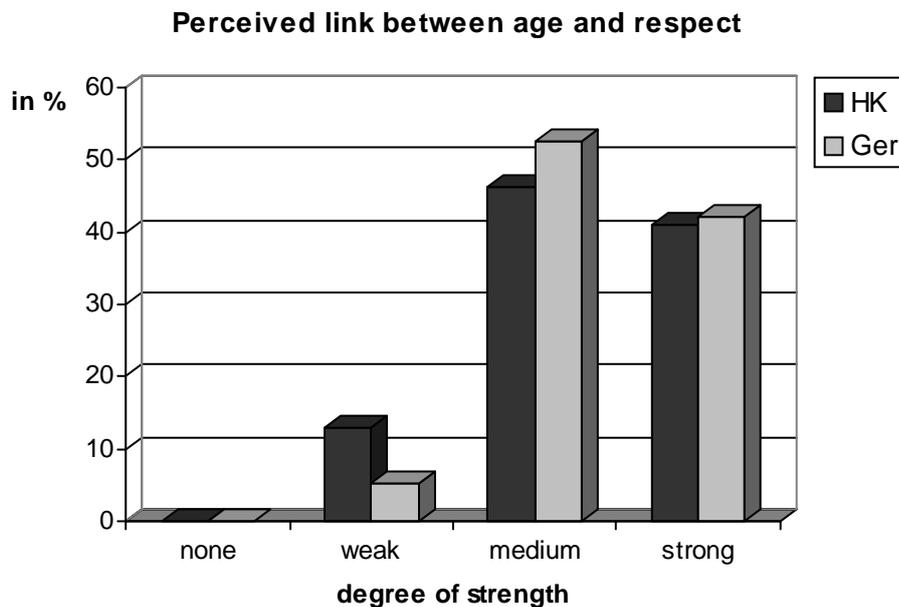


Figure 3.

Clearly, these findings need further anthropological and sociological explanation that cannot be provided here; why is there such a conceptual link between age and power in the minds of the Hong Kong students, and are there possibly different motivations for the comparatively similar findings for the two groups pertaining to age and respect?

The part testing the FAMILY concept revealed a parallel picture. Again, in the first question of this part, the students were asked to chose the seven most prominent links, here from a set of 17 items. Keywords like *respect* and *values* yielded no significantly different results. By contrast, *obedience* and *money* were found to be highly prominent in the Hong Kong group, while they received very low scores in the German group. In turn, *friends* was among the more prominent keywords for the German group, whereas it did not show to be important among the Honkongers.

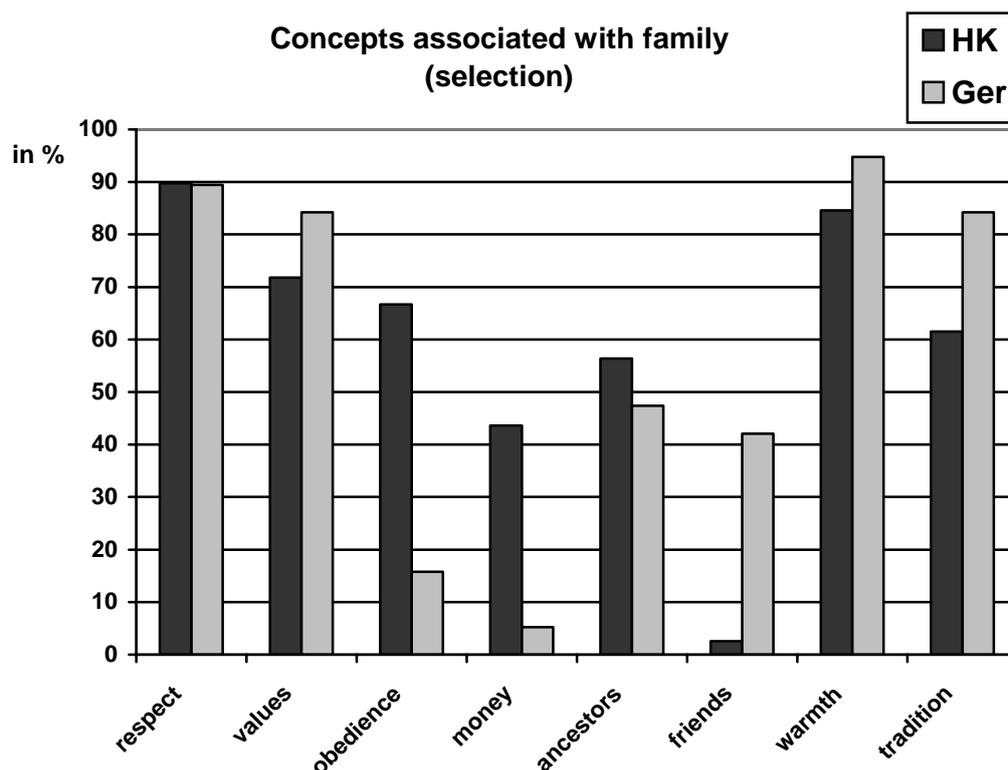


Figure 4.

The second question of this part testing the perceived strength of links individually again allowed for a more detailed picture on similarities and differences. Figures 5 and 6 present the results for the keywords *obedience* and *money*, which were found above to be prominent for the Hongkongers and of minor importance to the Germans. Bolton & Wolf (*in prep.*) ascribe the collocational and conceptual link between *family* and *money* to the Chinese cultural practice of “family support,” i.e., the obligation of the children to take care and to financially provide for the parents once the former earn their own income.⁹

⁹ For further explanations of the prominence of *money* and *family* in Hong Kong English, see Bolton & Wolf (*in prep.*).

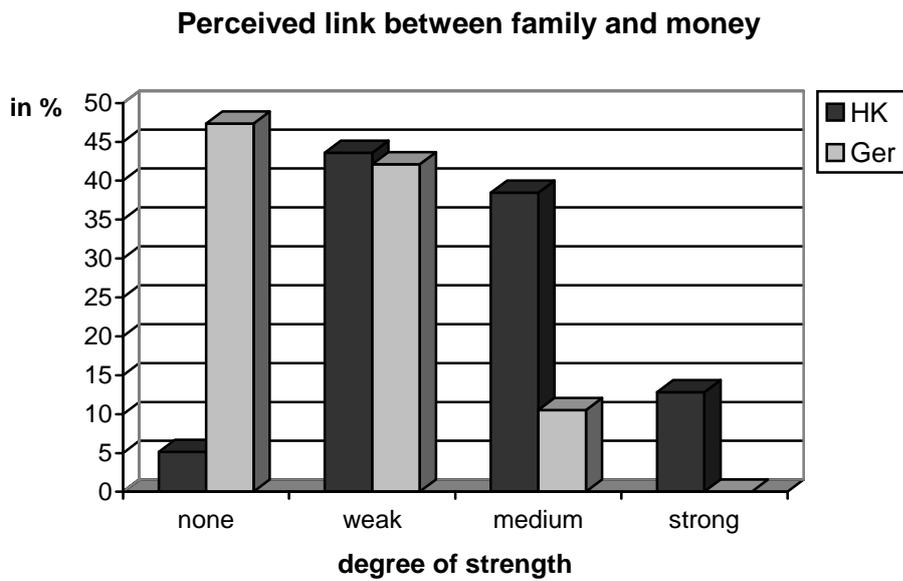


Figure 5.

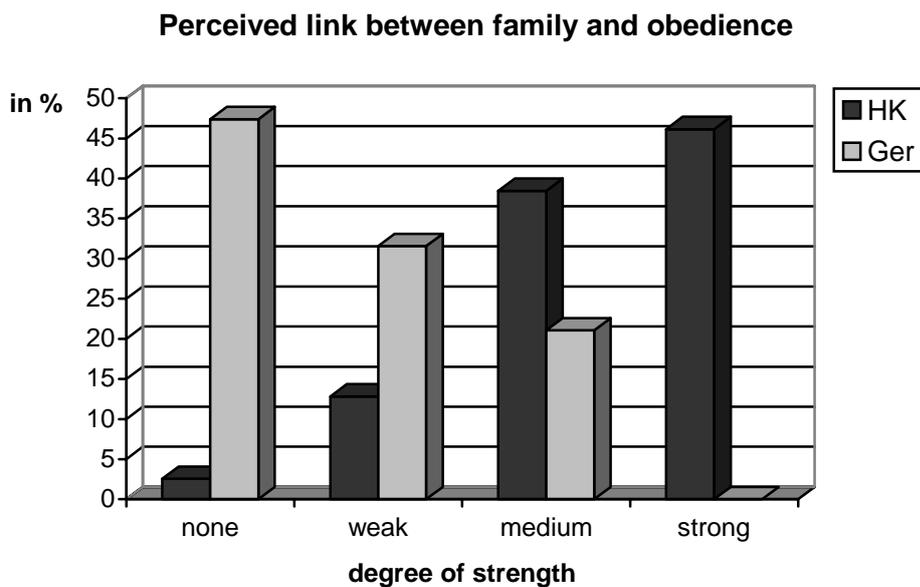


Figure 6.

These results suggest that the conceptual network in which concepts like AGE and FAMILY, and MONEY are embedded shows clear culture-specific traits. Some links in the network are more prominent for one group than for the other, and the perceived strength of the individual links may differ quite significantly from group to group.

Finally, we have a more detailed look at the ancestor concept. *Ancestor* was not among the keywords that received high scores in the question testing concepts associated with AGE, and it was in the middle rank as an associate of FAMILY. Here, the differences between the

two groups were not significant, although the Hong Kong group gave this keyword a moderately higher score in both cases (cf. figures 1 and 4). The results from the questions testing the perceived strength of the individual links to AGE and FAMILY, however, reveal a higher salience of the ancestor concept within the two conceptual networks for the Hongkongers, since in both cases, the link was found to be stronger in degree than for the German group.

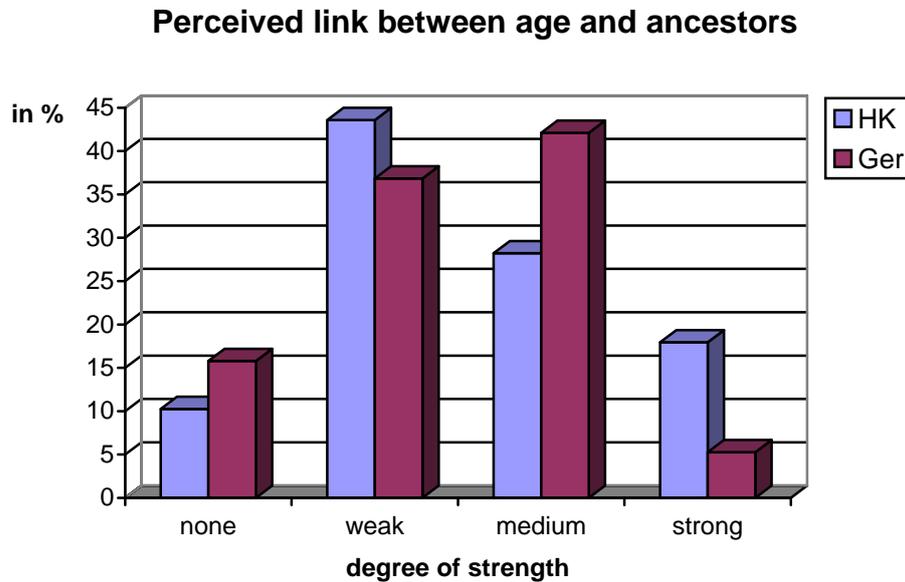


Figure 7.

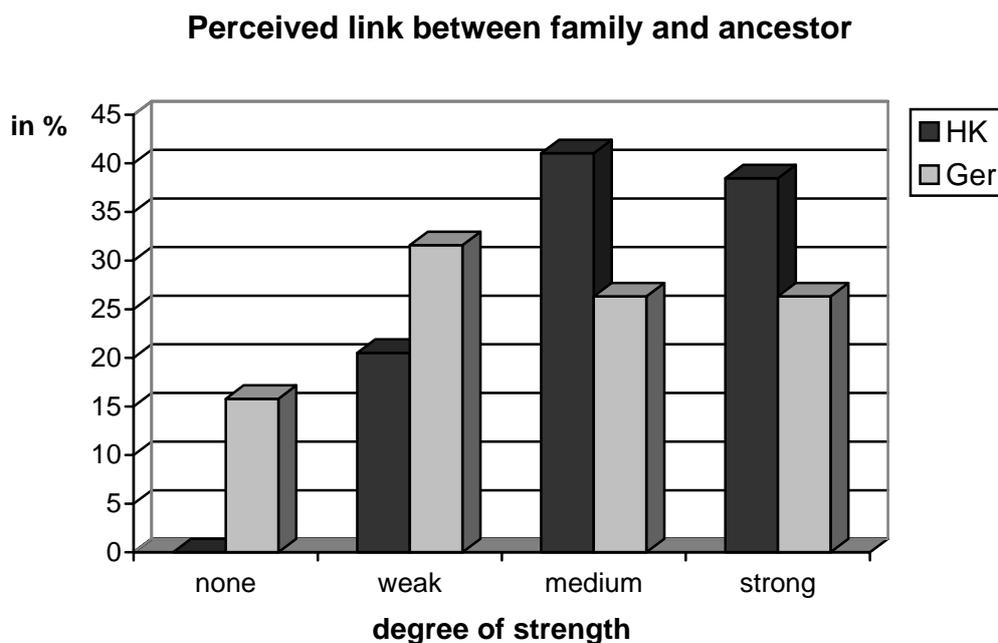


Figure 8.

Further insights come from the answers given in first part of the questionnaire, which called for open responses on a number of concepts, including ANCESTORS. Generally, in both groups, the answers given are highly heterogeneous. In both groups, they range from 'distant' or 'unimportant'

persons that lived long before me, hardly anything known (from the German data)

not important to me (from the German data)

Far far away from me. Don't know much about them (from the Hong Kong data)

They are someone very distant and I never touch or see them (from the Hong Kong data)

to 'close' and 'important'

An important part of your own life. They show you where your roots are and who belongs to your 'blood'. Without them you wouldn't exist (from the German data)

They are closely related to us as we are born and developed from them (from the Hong Kong data)

they are important for the whole family (from the Hong Kong data)

The Hong Kong data show that the concept of ancestors is still strongly associated with specific cultural practices linked to the traditional belief in ancestors, even among the young generation. 5 answers made direct references to such practices, among them are the following:

Respectful to them, sweep their graveyard every year. Burn some paper money, pay offerings.

I am a Buddhist, I do worship them often.

We do not have clear image of them and just know to grave sweep during the Ching Ming Festival.

It comes as no surprise that in the German data there is no reference to any specific cultural practice.

Heterogeneous, too, are the answers that relate to the actual present impact of ancestors on the life of the students. In the Hong Kong group, some of the answers reflect that this impact is still felt to be significant, active and most direct, e.g.

My parents' parents or relatives who are always taking care of my family in the heaven and we always miss them (from the Hong Kong data)

Take care of the living family members (from the Hong Kong data)

The relation between the living and the ancestors is a reciprocal one in Hong Kong and Chinese culture. The living are to provide for the ancestors in the world beyond, and they, in turn, look after the living. This is the point where the ancestor concepts touches the realm of

the supernatural. In Hong Kong, there exists, for example, a paper model industry that produces paper models of all kinds of imaginable things of daily life, to be burned for use by the ancestors.¹⁰

There is no parallel perception of an active role of ancestors in the German data. Rather, ancestors are clearly associated with the past, a perception that also dominates in the Hong Kong data. In both groups, the impact of ancestors was predominantly described in terms of biological descent and as an element of history and/or identity, e.g.

Our forebears belong to the past, while also having an impact on a family's values, traditions and social status. They may be either a source of pride or shame. In any case, they play a considerable role in regards to our identity (from the German data)

people you descent of; their life time is so far away from you that it has become already history; they are already dead and cannot tell you of the "The Old Times". (from the German data)

I cannot really write something about my ancestors because on the one hand side I do not know much about my ancestors and on the other hand side they do not really have any influence on my life except for the fact that our DNA matches in a way. (from the German data)

Affecting me indirectly, e.g. DNA, culture (from the Hong Kong data)

people who are in my family tree, who gave birth to predecessors who have died (from the Hong Kong data)

They are important to my birth but not to my growth (from the Hong Kong data)

Interestingly, all the answers given in the Hong Kong group locate the ancestor concept within the family domain. In the German group, there was a strong tendency to further relate the ancestor concept to the level of a country/people, e.g.

This is nothing I connect with my family, but with the world as a family, like the ancestors of a certain people or nation or in general the ancestors of mankind (from the German data)

on one hand my heritage on the other the history of the world (from the German data)

To close our discussion, we turn to a conceptual link that was already found to be clearly traceable through collocation patterns in the ICE-HK corpus (Bolton & Wolf *in prep.*), namely the one between *ancestors* and *respect*. The salience of this link emerges in a striking way in the answers by the Hong Kong students. The open questions called for very short answers, and the answers consisted of an average 12 words. Yet 14 of the answers

10 See Scott (1997) for the paper model industry, and Wolf (2006fc.) for the relevant conceptualizations and further linguistic examples from Hong Kong English.

given by Hongkongers made direct mention of the *respect for ancestors*, whereas *respect* only occurs once in the answers in the German group. Here are some illustrating examples from the Hong Kong data:

Chinese people normally respect our ancestors

Everyone should respect their ancestors

Are people who we should respect

They are respectful

The fact that Hongkongers in their early twenties clearly reveal this conceptual link between ancestors and respect shows that this traditional concept is salient even among the younger generation, and does not seem to have been affected as other aspects of the family domain by changes in Hong Kong culture (see Bolton & Wolf *in prep.*). The answers by the Hong Kong students suggest that respect for the ancestors is perceived to a significant degree as a “cultural imperative”. Note that in the majority of the answers mentioning respect for the ancestors, it is done with linguistic means expressing obligation (especially modals), e.g.:

People who should be respected

Have to respect them

They are someone who require my respect

People to be respected

Such a cultural imperative or obligation is completely absent from the German data, also linguistically.

6. A Tentative Move towards a Meaning-Oriented Pragmatics of Intercultural Communication and Consequences for Hermeneutics in Cognitive Linguistics

As we saw in our examples, the concepts of ‘ancestors,’ ‘family,’ and ‘age’ are tied to a network of culture-specific conceptualizations and frame various domains which are culturally salient in Hong Kong English. These networks belong to, in Kachru’s words (1982: 9), “entirely different semiotic and cultural systems,” and the task of a meaning-oriented or, for an alternative term, hermeneutic pragmatics¹¹ is to work out and profile those linguistically/conceptually coded parts of the cultural total which are highly salient, because their meanings will shade into every conversation in which relevant topics are discussed [alternatively: because these semantic networks will be activated whenever relevant topic are discussed]. Thus, Geeraerts’ (1992) argument for the role of hermeneutics in CL can be extended to intercultural communication, on the basis of the very theoretical and methodological principles he has described: “Lexical meaning is not considered to be an

11 Note that the term “hermeneutic pragmatics” is used in a different sense and context by Dussel (1998).

autonomous phenomenon, but is rather inextricably bound up with the individual, cultural, social, historical experience of the language user” Geeraerts’ (1992: 266). To further draw from Geeraerts, in intercultural encounters, the salient culture-specific conceptualizations are “expectational patterns that shape our experience of novel situations,” what Geeraerts (1992: 269) calls “paradigms.” What this means for the cases we described is that, for example, a German student would use his or her “paradigms” to make sense of ancestors, ghosts, families, or old age if he or she came to Hong Kong or if these things were discussed in a conversation with a Hongkonger and vice versa.

Yet it is an open question to what extent people are aware of their own culture-specific preoccupation, when they enter inter-cultural communication. To overcome the limitations posed by interpretational paradigms, sporadic contacts with people from a different culture will not suffice; intercultural *understanding* depends on the willingness and/or necessity to further deal with a different culture and to engage in continued encounters with people from different cultures. Studying a different culture provides the chance, on the one hand, to correct our own erroneous or deficient understanding of that culture and enhance it and, on the other, to come to realize that our own paradigms are not universal. Therefore, it is not so much a question of meeting what ever kind of norm in an inter-cultural encounter, but rather of preparing the ground for bringing succeeding communications to a higher level of understanding. This is what we mean by hermeneutic pragmatics.¹²

Philosophically, this raises the problematic of relativism again; if we are a product of our own culture, and our interpretations are influenced or even shaped by it, how could we gain “objective knowledge” of other cultures via their expressions? This has been a disputed question in the hermeneutic tradition (cf. Gadamer 1972; Geeraerts 1992), and here, for reasons of space, this question has to be left aside (but see Wolf & Polzenhagen *in prep.*). Methodologically, however, the approaches towards understanding should be as diverse “as human experience itself” (Geeraerts 1992: 268); i.e., ideally, there should be “an interdisciplinary fusion of historical, psychological, anthropological, linguistic research” (Geeraerts 1992: 268). Again, the point is to broaden the focus in pragmatics, not to unduly restrict it. In turn, the need for diversity also holds true for the data used for analysis. Thus, with Quinn & Holland (1987: 16), we share the commitment to an “eclectic exploitation of all possible sources of ... data,” including non-linguistic data, as in the case of the paper models in Hong Kong culture.

12 *Understanding* and hermeneutics is also at the center of the philosophical treatise on intercultural communication by Young (1996/2000).

7. Summary

In this discussion, we tried to raise the awareness about certain problems of intercultural communication which have not or only superficially been addressed in linguistic pragmatics.¹³ This restriction is due, we believe, to the theoretical limitations posed by the dominant functionalist view of pragmatics. We are not arguing against functional approaches in intercultural pragmatics, rather, we called for the strengthening of the meaning-based, hermeneutic orientation in the study of intercultural communication. The functional and the hermeneutic perspectives are by no means mutually exclusive; rather, they may be regarded, ideally, as supportive of each other, and they come, to varying degrees, in communion. We pointed to the philosophical problem of relativism that needs to be accounted for and made note of the fact that a great deal of intercultural communication takes place in English, which brings about its own set of theoretical challenges.

To exemplify how a meaning-based analysis of intercultural encounters needs to be situated in the wider framework of culture-specific conceptualizations, we focused on certain concepts that emerged as culturally significant in a corpus linguistic study on Hong Kong English by Bolton & Wolf (*in prep.*). Our target groups were university students in Hong Kong and Germany, and we compared their views pertaining to *family*, *age*, and *ancestors*. Though the results for the two groups were similar as regards the relation they perceive between *family* and *respect* and *values*, they differed significantly, *inter alia*, for the relation between *age* and *power*, *family* and *obedience*, *family* and *money*, *family* and *ancestors*, and the perceived role of the ancestors. Thus, our survey independently confirmed some of the findings of the corpus study, and this converging evidence makes a strong case for the validity and usefulness of methodologically varied approaches to the linguistic study of culture, in order to highlight *understanding* rather than mere *effective functioning* in intercultural communication.

13 A number of recent publications begin to make up for this imbalance. To name only some of them: Kiesling & Paulston's (2005) reader in intercultural discourse and communication, contains, with Kiesling (2005), an incorporation of the cultural-model perspective. Scollon & Scollon (2001: ch. 7) give an illuminating discussion of culture and cultural stereotyping. Holliday, Hyde & Kullman's (2004) course and resource book in intercultural communication focuses specifically on many of the issues also taken up in our paper.

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Nationality: _____ Sex: _____ Age: _____ Mother tongue: _____

Please give a brief characterization of what you associate with the following concepts:

Ghosts

Members of my family

Family support

Family activities

Money

Ancestors

Please fill in four different words so each sentence makes sense to you

_____ is a family

_____ is a family

_____ is a family

_____ is a family

Whom would you address as

father

mother

brother

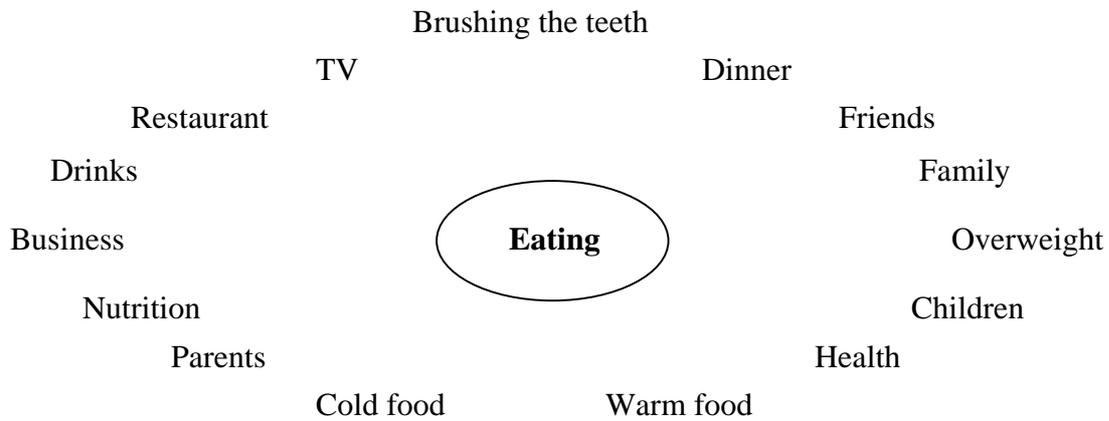
sister

aunt or auntie

uncle

cousin

Please draw lines to the 7 items that you relate most with 'eating'

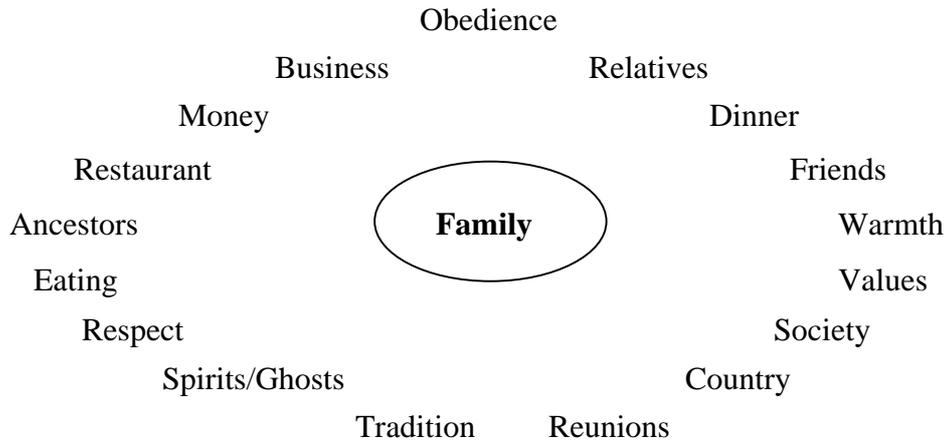


Please indicate the strength of the link you perceive between the following items and 'eating'

	no link	weak link	medium link	strong link
Dinner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nutrition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
TV	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restaurant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drinks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brushing the teeth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overweight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Warm food	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cold food	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there any further items that you strongly associate with 'eating'?

Please draw lines to the 7 items that you relate most with 'family'

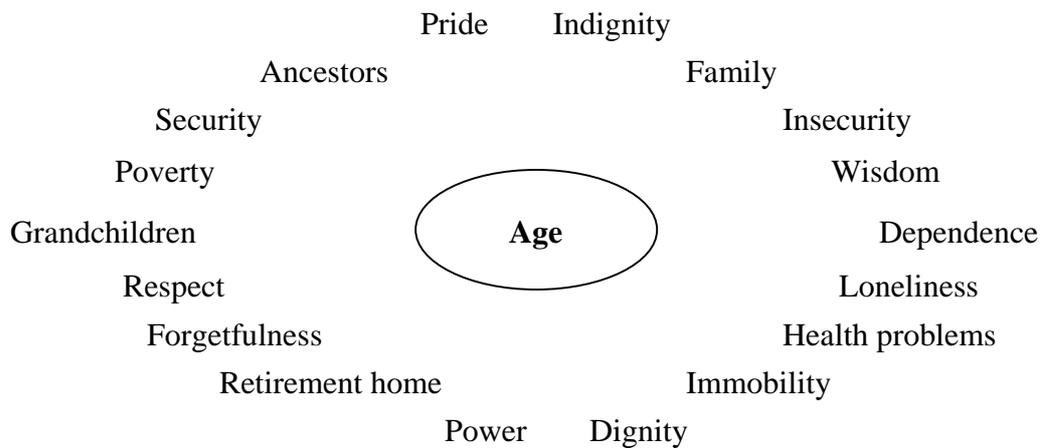


Please indicate the strength of the link you perceive between the following items and 'family'

	no link	weak link	medium link	strong link
Dinner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Warmth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Values	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Country	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reunions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tradition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spirits/Ghosts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Respect	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eating	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ancestors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restaurant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Obedience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relatives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there any further items that you strongly associate with 'family'?

Please draw lines to the 7 items that you relate most with 'age'



Please indicate the strength of the link you perceive between the following items and 'age'

	no link	weak link	medium link	strong link
Respect	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Forgetfulness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poverty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dignity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Security	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wisdom	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loneliness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Insecurity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ancestors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Power	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indignity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grandchildren	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dependence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Immobility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pride	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Retirement home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there any further items that you strongly associate with 'age'?
