

PROJECT

„Intercultural communication in international organisations“:

A case study of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe in Graz.

Researcher: Dr. Hermine Penz, Institut für Anglistik, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

Present Position: Universitätsassistentin / Assistant Professor

Academic background:

This study will be undertaken as a "Habilitationprojekt" at the Institut für Anglistik, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz. Prof. Alwin Fill will be the academic mentor. A "Habilitation" is the major piece of research work which is the basic requirement for becoming a full Professor at Austrian and German universities.

Description of the project:

In most international institutions intercultural communication is a fact of everyday life. Communication in these institutions is characterised by the fact that speakers of varying mother tongues and coming from different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other in a foreign language. The people involved may only interact with each other temporarily, though intercultural interactions may also be a constant feature of people's working life, as is for example the case with people working for the United Nations or at the ECML. Research in this area has mainly concentrated on organisational behaviour in business. A great number of these studies concentrates on the analysis of cross-cultural behavior, usually contrasting two different cultures, e.g. China and the USA (Tung 1982, Scollon & Scollon 1995), Japan and the USA (Yamada 1992), etc. Most of these studies have been done by American scholars. So far studies on communication in international non-profit organisations and international political organisations are hardly existent.

The present study proposal aims at investigating intercultural communication at the workshops and expert meetings of the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe in Graz. The centre, which was founded in 1994, operates within the framework of the Council of Europe. It aims at promoting the learning and teaching of modern languages in a multilingual Europe. The unique feature of this particular setting is that participants come from different European countries including Eastern Europe and they come here to discuss, exchange and develop ideas for better international communication through the teaching and learning of languages. They have had varying practice in intercultural contacts. The working languages used in the meetings are in most cases English and French. The analysis of intercultural communication will mainly concentrate on English as a working language.

The study will combine a thorough theoretical discussion of various aspects of intercultural communication with a linguistic analysis of intercultural communication at the European Language Centre. Part of the theoretical considerations will also be a critical discussion of different terms that have been used in this area of research such as "intercultural", "intracultural", "multicultural", "interethnic", "international", etc.

The following aspects of intercultural communication will be investigated:

- Negotiating linguistic and cultural meanings
- Interactional behaviour such as turn-taking, overlap, interruptions
- The use of metacommunication
- Politeness strategies
- Direct and indirect language use
- Misunderstanding and problems of communication
- Successful communication
- Processes of decision making in workshops and plenary meetings
- The influence of proficiency in English on communication

The methods used in this study are: ethnographic description of communicative events within the organisation, participant observation, discourse analysis, questionnaires and/or interviews with the participants.

Time frame:

The proposed time frame for this study is 4-5 years; however, there will be annual reports about the work in progress. Proposed beginning: May/June 1999

Selected References:

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