Interculturality and postdigital communicative practice

Building interdisciplinary pathways between intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, and related fields

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Abstract *This introductory chapter sets the stage for a volume that brings together perspectives from sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and intercultural communication studies to explore the complex interplay between digital and intercultural practices. Grounded in discussions from the ReDICo Encounters series, the chapter reflects on how digital technologies shape communicative practices and interculturality in ways that challenge existing theoretical and methodological frameworks. We argue for an integrated approach that draws on the strengths of both sociolinguistics and intercultural communication, particularly in the context of what we term postdigital communicative practice—i.e., the practices shaped by the interweaving of online and offline modes of interaction. The chapter introduces key concepts, outlines methodological considerations, and proposes the use of data sessions as a means of fostering interdisciplinary dialogue. It also offers an overview of the chapters in the volume, highlighting the diverse ways in which contributors investigate the cultural, social, and linguistic dimensions of digital communication.*

Keywords *Postdigital Communicative Practice; Interculturality; Digital Interculturality; Sociolinguistics; Intercultural Communication; Digital Communication*

1. Introduction

Throughout the last decades, we have experienced, sometimes viscerally, how digital technologies shape the way we access information, communicate, construct identities, form relationships, and engage with interculturality. From

social networking sites to video-sharing platforms and instant messaging apps, digital spaces have become arenas where intercultural encounters take place, social and cultural meanings are negotiated, and norms are established. We have thus witnessed how digital practices, defined as assemblages of actions, digital technologies, social goals, and social identities (Jones et al., 2015, p. 3), have become intermingled with intercultural practices, in which a myriad of cultural references, norms, and modes of expression operate simultaneously.

Sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and related fields have made foundational contributions to understanding how digital practices contribute to identity work and reveal underlying language ideologies and power relations. Intercultural communication studies have, in turn, critically examined the concept of culture itself, frequently challenging essentialist leanings and instead highlighting the potential for dynamic and context-sensitive perspectives. This edited volume emerged from the ReDICo Encounters, a series of scholarly sessions that combined presentations and discussions, seeking to bring scholars from these fields into dialogue. The series aimed to explore and experiment with methods of integrating diverse perspectives to enhance and deepen our understanding of practices that are both digital and intercultural, and that, therefore, potentially require more comprehensive epistemological and analytical frameworks than those provided by sociolinguistics or intercultural communication studies alone. We hope this volume will serve as a valuable resource for a broad readership, including researchers and students in language-related disciplines (such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, applied linguistics, and others) and intercultural communication studies who are interested in how digitality impacts the ways we communicate and 'do' culture.

This introductory chapter is organised in the following way: In Section 2, we explain what we mean when we refer to intercultural communication and interculturality. In Section 3, we examine the notion of communicative practice, as described and well-researched in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, and demonstrate how language, society, and culture intersect in communicative practices. In Section 4, we turn to what we call 'postdigital communicative practice,' i.e., practices where the online and offline perspectives intersect, again highlighting the interplay of language, society, and culture, but now influenced by digital technologies. In both Sections 3 and 4, we ask how our understanding of sociolinguistic processes can be meaningfully connected with conceptualisations of culture and interculturality

as part of our effort to foster dialogue between sociolinguistics (and related disciplines) and intercultural communication studies. In Section 5, we point to existing methods for researching intercultural communication streams and digital communicative practices and propose the organisation of data sessions as an analytical exercise that supports the kind of interdisciplinary analysis of postdigital intercultural practices we have in mind when we call for a coming together of sociolinguistics and intercultural communication. In Section 6, we introduce the chapters and provide an overview of what readers can expect from the multifaceted contributions to be found in this volume.

2. Intercultural communication and interculturality

The concept of 'culture' has been at the core of scientific discussions and disputes. Our joint project ReDICo (Researching Digital Interculturality Co-operatively) has based its theoretical undertaking, to understand 'digital interculturality' (Conti et al., forthcoming; see also Conti et al.'s chapter in this volume),[1] on Bolten's theory of interculturality, which acknowledges the multiplicity of *Lebenswelten* comprised in the notion of 'culture'. In this vein, Bolten (2015, p. 118) defined culturality as "familiar multiplicity" (*vertraute Vielfalt*). Thus, culturality denotes a situation in which individuals act within a field of action that is known and familiar to them; that is, they know the conventions of behaviours and thoughts and can easily make sense of words and actions employed and performed by other individuals in that same field of action. Interculturality, by contrast, is defined as "unfamiliar multiplicity" (*unvertraute Vielfalt*) (Bolten, 2015, p.118). According to this definition, interculturality occurs when individuals find themselves in a situation where the frames of reference are strange (see Schütz, 1944) and cannot be immediately grasped. However, given that individuals endure in this new field of action, culturality will progressively emerge as unfamiliarity gives way to familiarity (see also Conti, 2023).

Bolten's theory also acknowledges that interculturality can be experienced from structural or processual perspectives (Bolten, 2012, 2020). The structure-oriented perspective presupposes a view of culture marked by a high degree

1 Digital interculturality has been defined as "an interdisciplinary field that deals with intercultural practices, as well as intercultural discursive developments, methods, and theories related to the digital space" (Conti et al., forthcoming, n. p.).

of spatial specification and boundedness. Discourses around national or regional cultures are often connected to the structural perspective, which regards cultures as containers (Bolten, 2012). The process-oriented viewpoint implies a dynamic understanding of culture, as reflected in the actual processes taking place in interaction, whether working jointly on a particular task, as in the workplace and other institutional settings, or establishing rapport with conversational partners. The theory also acknowledges that there is no correct or false perspective and that "every perspective retains a certain level of validity" (Bolten, 2014, p. 1). In this context, the closer one zooms upon a particular cultural field of action, "the more differentiated and multifaceted the relationship networks (local culture, group culture, couple culture, etc.) will be deemed to be" and "the further one zooms away, the more undifferentiated and homogeneous such a field will appear (organizational culture, ethnic culture, national culture, etc.)". Analytically speaking, Bolten (2014, p.1) then argues that one should avoid a loss of orientation ("One cannot see the woods for the trees"), as well as the dangers of essentialism and stereotyping as in, e.g., seeing a homogenous area of forest but failing to recognise the individual trees. Thus, both perspectives, the structural and the processual one, may be deemed relevant.[2]

There are several other theories of culture and interculturality (see, e.g., Holliday, 1999, on big vs. small cultures, see Busch's chapter in this volume) as well as models that attempt to describe intercultural processes, i.e., changes in perception of social situations resulting from intercultural contact (e.g., Bennett, 1986, 2017).[3] However, it has been argued that, due to a disciplinary basis in business studies, management studies, and psychology, the field of intercultural communication has not paid enough attention to linguistic aspects. Piller (2012, p. 9) writes that "[f]or a linguist, a large part of the intercultural communication literature makes surprising reading. Part of the surprise results from the limited to nonexistent attention to language, as if (…) languages were a negligible aspect of communication". This is unfortunate because, in fact, language-related disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, have a sophisticated apparatus for describing the relationship between language and society, and ultimately also culture, from both structural and processual perspectives. In the

2 See Bolten's 2020 critique of scientific debates regarding the notions of inter- and transculturality.

3 For descriptions and critique of models of interculturality and intercultural competence, see e.g., Bolten (2020); Rathje (2007); and Schröder (2024, pp. 9–89).

following, we review some of these notions that have come to shape how sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, discourse analysts, and scholars in related disciplines explain the interplay between language, society, and culture. At first, we will focus on conceptual notions that have been developed out of research with physically co-present communities. Later, in Section 4, we will proceed to examine how these notions have been adopted in studies of digital practice.

3. Language, society, and culture as offline communicative practice

Linguistic theory has experienced significant shifts throughout the decades. An important and influential trend was Noam Chomsky's framing of linguistics as a science of linguistic 'competence' (Chomsky, 1965), i.e., a speaker's mental knowledge of the rules of a language and their ability to generate and understand grammatically correct sentences. 'Competence' is thus abstracted from actual language use and assumes an idealised speaker-hearer in a homogeneous speech community. Modern sociolinguistics, according to Blommaert (2018, p. 22), emerges as a reaction to that: "the abstract language designated as the object of linguistics was countered by situated, contextualized 'speech' and such speech had to be understood in terms of a dialectics of language and social life".

Thus, sociolinguistics—understood here as an umbrella term encompassing other language-related disciplines, including linguistic anthropology (see Coupland, 2001)—paved the way for a focus on communicative practice described as the socially and culturally embedded ways people use language in everyday life. According to Hanks (1996), communicative practice consists of three interwoven elements: (a) formal structure, (b) activity, and (c) ideology. Formal structure refers to linguistic forms and conventions and comprises, for example, syntax and lexis in language in use. Activity refers to what people accomplish, or try to accomplish, interactionally—e.g., negotiating, apologising, engaging in small talk, and teaching—and the social roles performed by speakers in such interactions. Finally, ideology refers to values, beliefs, and power relations that shape how language is perceived and used, for instance, which language, with which linguistic features, are considered legitimate and which ones are marginalised; thus, ideology is embedded in cultural norms and social practices, and it has a bearing on speakers' judgments, expectations, and positions concerning language and communication.

This and other influential descriptions of communicative practice (see Silverstein's Total Linguistic Fact, 1985) came to shape the study of languages in productive ways as language started to be examined as much more than a bundle of lexical items and syntactic rules (formal structure) and began to be looked at as a social phenomenon influenced by interactional settings (activity) and socially shared norms and beliefs (ideology).

This multilayered understanding of language is connected to sophisticated analytical notions and frameworks within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology which enable us to understand and describe sociolinguistic processes that occur when people interact with each other in real-world situations. In the following, we will explain the notions of contextualisation, indexicality, enregisterment, chronotopes, scales, and language ideologies as they have proven highly influential in the description of meaning-making and meaning negotiation in communicative situations. This list is not exhaustive, but it addresses concepts mentioned in some chapters in this volume and aims to ensure a shared conceptual foundation among readers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.[4]

'Contextualisation' refers to the process by which speakers use verbal and non-verbal cues to signal how their utterances should be interpreted in a given social situation. It serves as a foundation for interaction, guiding speakers and listeners in producing and interpreting utterances through linguistic and non-linguistic cues (Gumperz, 1982). These cues, such as prosody, discourse markers, and code-switching, contribute to the construction of meaning within a specific interactional frame. A well-known example comes from Gumperz's (1982) analysis of interactions at a cafeteria in an airport in the UK, where communication breakdowns occurred between South Asian staff and British customers. In one case, it was noted that the intonation used by Indian and Pakistani staff members when asking customers if they wanted some gravy ("Gravy?", p. 173) was perceived as rude by the British customers, who were likely to interpret it as a command rather than a polite offer. However, in the servers' cultural background, such intonation is neutral and appropriate. Gumperz argued that the lack of expected contextualisation cues, such as rising intonation or hedged phrases ("Would you like some gravy?"), led to misinterpretation of intent. While the literal message was clear, the social

4 For more encompassing discussions of conceptual 'nuggets' in sociolinguistics, see Coupland, 2016, p. 10; Blommaert, 2018, pp. 19–40).

meaning (i.e., politeness, friendliness, service orientation) was misunderstood due to differing contextualisation cues by the South Asian staff and the British customers.[5]

Crucially, contextualisation is closely connected to 'indexicality', the phenomenon that explains how linguistic features (such as words, prosody, or communicative styles) come to signal broader social meanings, including identities, stances, and ideological positions (Silverstein, 1985). Through repeated use, these indexical relationships become sedimented, shaping how particular speech patterns are perceived within or beyond specific communities. For instance, the use of formal titles may index respect or social distance, while saying 'y'all' can signal a Southern U.S. identity. In his study of multiethnic urban areas in London, Rampton (1995) observed how white working-class youth adopted elements of Punjabi, Caribbean English, and Creole to index stances of coolness, defiance, or solidarity in peer-group interactions. Indexicality is thus a dynamic sociosemiotic process through which language choices signal identity, group affiliation, and social positioning in particular interactional moments.

The process of social recognition and entrenchment of indexical relationships is encapsulated in the notion of 'enregisterment' (Agha, 2003), which describes how linguistic forms acquire social salience and become associated with social identities, ideologies, and context. Once enregistered within a given social order, these linguistic features are available for performance, parody, or authentication, reinforcing or contesting social hierarchies. Using the prestige register of spoken British English Received Pronunciation (RP) as a central empirical case, Agha (2003) showed how linguistic forms (such as accents) acquire and circulate cultural value through enregisterment. He demonstrated how RP came to be constructed as a socially recognised marker of elite status, authority, and education and how this recognition is sustained and transformed through media, institutional practices, and everyday interactions. In this vein, Agha (2003) argues that "cultural value is not a static property of things or people but a precipitate of sociohistorically locatable practices, including discursive practices" (p. 232).

Understanding enregistered linguistic forms requires situating them within 'chronotopes', which link communicative practices to specific historical moments, spatial imaginaries, and interactional expectations. Based on

5 For a short overview of Gumperz's work in German, see Oliveira (2023); for English, see Oliveira (2023a).

Bakhtin (1981), Blommaert (2015) described chronotopes as "invokable chunks of history that organize the indexical order of discourse" (p. 105), given their capacity to "invoke and enable a plot structure, characters or identities, and social and political worlds in which actions become dialogically meaningful, evaluated, and understandable in specific ways" (p. 109). For instance, referring to Stalin in Western Discourse can evoke a Cold War chronotope, where Stalinism is equated with the enemy and the Stalinist leader is characterised by dictatorship, violence, and totalitarianism. Similarly, images of Che Guevara can serve to reframe current acts of social activism within a historical tradition of leftist rebellion, establishing an indexical connection to that past (Blommaert, 2015, p. 111). Chronotopic frames, thus, make us aware that language users evoke multiple temporal-spatial orders in discourse and everyday communicative practice, engaging in an ongoing display and negotiation of stances and social identities.

'Scales' offer a helpful way to understand how language use is shaped by broader social hierarchies (Blommaert, 2015). Not all language resources circulate freely or are treated equally. Instead, they are subject to social processes that assign them different degrees of value and legitimacy, depending on the context in which they are used. This means that certain ways of speaking or writing may be considered more "appropriate" or "prestigious" in particular institutional, national, or global settings, while others may be overlooked or marginalised. Blommaert (2007, p. 6) illustrates this through the example of a student telling their supervisor, "I'll start with a chapter reporting on my fieldwork", to which the supervisor replies, "We start our dissertations with a literature review chapter here". In this moment, the supervisor shifts from the immediate, personal context (the student's plan) to a broader institutional norm about academic writing. This shift represents a 'scale jump'—a move from the local and situated to a translocal, generalised level, where conventions that are valid across a wider academic field are invoked. In this way, the notion of scales helps us trace how language practices travel across contexts, how they gain or lose value, and how their meanings change depending on their position within local, national, or global structures.

Finally, 'language ideologies' refer to understandings about the nature, structure, and use of linguistic forms that are socially embedded and politically positioned (Gal, 2023; see also Silverstein, 1985). These shared understandings about language use and language varieties often influence one's perceptions of languages and their speakers as more legitimate or better suited for certain purposes than others (Da Costa et al., 2014, p. 359). Examples of language

ideologies discussed in the literature are ideologies of language hierarchy—according to which certain varieties are considered more legitimate than others (e.g., national languages vs. dialects)—and language purism, which naturalises the idea of pure and bounded languages and marginalises linguistic diversity (Weber & Horner, 2017, pp. 16–20).

Thus, sociolinguistics and related disciplines have developed a pretty robust analytical apparatus for describing how the three dimensions of communicative practice—formal structure, activity, and ideology—interact and undergo semiotic processes that are in place not only within well-established speech communities and communities of practice but also in intercultural contexts. In this vein, if we want to shed light on how individuals transform (or attempt to transform) unfamiliarity into familiarity—i.e., interculturality into culturality—it seems crucial to understand the processes that invariably influence their interaction with the unknown. Therefore, differing sets of contextualisation cues and indexical relations—pointing to differently enregistered linguistic and communicative resources—may be in place due to speakers' unique socialisation trajectories. Besides this, invoking shared chronotopes and performing scale operations (e.g., scale jumps, as exemplified above) may likewise prove more challenging in situations where some linguistic and communicative resources cannot be assumed to be shared (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Mortensen, 2017). Finally, the power of language ideologies cannot be dismissed: the very choice of language and the use of certain syntactical, prosodical, and lexical features by speakers in intercultural encounters are embedded in centuries-long conceptualisations of what linguistic and communicative resources are considered appropriate and legitimate. This is crucial for understanding asymmetrical power relations in gate-keeping intercultural encounters, such as asylum-seeking (Blommaert, 2009; Reynolds, forthcoming), schooling (Rampton, 1995, 2006), and other types of gate-keeping encounters (Gumperz, 1982).

4. Language, society, and culture as postdigital communicative practice

Communicative practice has undergone dramatic changes in the last few decades as the media through which interaction takes place have evolved in unprecedented ways. From telephones to mobile phones and smartphones, from desktop computers to laptops, from video-conferencing applications

such as Skype (recently discontinued) and Zoom to messengers and apps featuring video calls such as WhatsApp and Facetime, the media affordances available in different types of hardware and software have impacted the way we communicate to one another. These technologies have also impacted the reach of communication. Whereas in the past, the telephone was used to communicate with friends, family, or institutions, today's digital technologies—such as apps, software, and social media—enable both focused and unfocused interaction (Goffman, 1963)[6] with virtually anyone, including countless individuals we may not know personally and will likely never meet. However, throughout these developments, some strands within language-related disciplines have remained largely committed to what is considered the prototypical form of social interaction: face-to-face communication within physically co-present speech communities or communities of practice, often in dyadic formats. This scenario is changing, and scholars have increasingly acknowledged that the complexity of communicative practice has taken on new dimensions with the growing integration of digital technologies. Jones et al. (2015) make the point that

> [d]igital technologies have made (…) aspects of context much more complicated. They have altered our experience of the spatial and temporal aspects of context by creating complex 'layerings' of online and offline spaces. They have altered our experience of social contexts, allowing us to participate in a wide range of different kinds of synchronous and asynchronous social gatherings with different configurations of participants (Jones, 2004). And they have altered our experience of the 'context of culture' by enabling new and complex global flows of cultural products and ideas. (Jones et al. 2015, p.9)

Thus, digital communication reshapes sociolinguistic processes, influencing how communicative practices emerge, gain meaning, and circulate across online spaces. The sociolinguistic processes described in Section 3 above gain new nuances when examined in their connection to postdigitality, a notion that

6 In the original reference, focused interaction refers to situations in which individuals engage in a shared activity or conversation and maintain mutual attention, such as in meetings or dialogues. In contrast, unfocused interaction occurs when individuals are co-present in the same space but do not directly engage with one another, as in passing on the street, while still managing social cues like eye contact or body orientation (Goffman, 1963).

stresses how the online and offline dimensions of life cannot be seen as separate but are instead deeply entangled and mutually constitutive (Cramer, 2014; see also the chapter by Conti et al. in this volume). In this vein, the process of enregisterment in digital spaces (Blommaert, 2018) plays a crucial role in shaping online linguistic repertoires. Internet slang, emojis (Beißwenger & Pappert, 2022; Logi & Zappavigna, 2023), and graphic cues (Androutsopoulos, 2023), for instance, become recognisable as part of specific registers, indexing particular identities, affiliations, and communicative norms. The same is true for online storytelling, a major trend on social media, which follows specific patterns (or 'formats', see the chapter by Georgakopoulou in this volume) and thereby communicates certain stances, positions, and social identities. However, this process is not isolated; it is also shaped by algorithmic effects (Blommaert, 2018, p. 55; Maly, 2023). As linguistic forms gain enregistered meanings, their indexical associations are further reinforced or disrupted by platform algorithms, which largely determine their visibility or marginality. For instance, the strategic use of hashtags, emojis, or specific linguistic markers can index political stances (Silva & Maia, 2022) or belonging (Zappavigna, 2014; Zappavigna & Ross, 2024). Still, algorithms mediate whose voices are amplified and which linguistic resources become dominant (see Conti et al.'s chapter in this volume).

The circulation of enregistered and indexicalised linguistic resources across digital platforms also highlights the role of scales in global digital communication. This process, for instance, leads to certain features—e.g., language varieties or communicative styles—gaining popularity and acquiring new indexicalities overnight. At the same time, globally circulating discourses, memes, and communicative norms are locally recontextualised, acquiring new indexical meanings within different cultural settings (on local recontextualisations, see Thielemann & Savych in this volume). This scalar movement of language interacts with chronotopic framings in online discourse (Blommaert & Varis, 2015; see also 'mobile chronotopes' in Lyons and Tagg, 2019) as digital users situate linguistic practices within temporal and spatial frames. For example, narratives about the "early internet" or futuristic AI-driven communication construct specific chronotopes that shape users' perceptions of authenticity, linguistic change, and digital identities.

Within these shifting linguistic landscapes, multimodal communication (Page, 2022) further illustrates the complexity of digital discourse. To navigate multiple communicative contexts and audiences, online users switch between languages and linguistic varieties, platform-specific vernaculars, and multi-

modal resources, such as GIFs, memes, and emojis. These instances of digital language use are not merely a matter of individual choice, but they are embedded within broader enregistered practices, indexical associations, and algorithmic constraints. A meme, for instance, may carry specific enregistered meanings within a digital community while also acquiring new indexical values as it scales across different digital spaces and chronotopic framings.

Against this backdrop, the understanding of what a community is gains brand new shades. While a community of practice has been characterised by the sharedness of objectives and communicative resources, other forms of community—e.g., light communities and transient communities and groups (Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Lønsmann et al., 2017; Pitzl, 2018; Oliveira et al., 2024)—have begun to be discussed and rendered in analytical and conceptual terms. These are communities where indexicalities cannot be assumed to be shared (Mortensen, 2017), a phenomenon that is especially relevant in intercultural contexts.

It is also interesting to observe how the digital sphere, which often grants users anonymity, has been a space where language ideologies—which frequently remain hidden in everyday communication—are given full disclosure in online discourse. Szabla and Blommaert (2019) have demonstrated how, in a *Facebook* discussion, users orient to local digital community norms by explicitly referring to community rules, especially when they perceive these rules as having been violated. The discussion contains several tokens of situated digital-community norms referring to legitimate rules in this community or on the platform/social media as a whole; however, it also includes comments that reveal "a higher-scale context" in which language ideologies are at play, for instance when a user accuses the author of a Facebook post of illegitimate use of the Polish language: "Fucking great journalist who makes spelling mistakes…" (p. 22).

Taken together, these interconnected notions and processes illustrate what postdigital communicative practice looks like: while the three dimensions described by Hanks (1996)—formal structure, activity, and ideology—are still in place, they are constantly influenced by a blend of digital affordances, multimodal practices, and algorithmic effects. This understanding of postdigital communicative practice embedded in the online-offline nexus[7] provides

7 The online-offline nexus refers to the inseparable and dynamic relationship between online and offline social life. In this sense, digital communication is not understood as a separate realm but deeply intertwined with offline contexts—shaped by and shaping

a useful background for examining digital intercultural practices. These practices indicate an omnipresent confrontation with interculturality, as described above, which involves unfamiliarity with, for example, new digital technologies, platforms, and digital communities. This confrontation may, in turn, trigger renewed strategies to create culturality—i.e., new routines of action (Gröschke & Bolten, 2013) and new belongings in affinity spaces (Gee, 2007; Dovchin, 2020; Zappavigna, 2014) and light communities (Blommaert & Varis, 2015).

Amidst all this, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and language technologies have shaken the foundations of postdigital communicative practice, as acknowledged in both the intercultural communication (Zhu et al., 2024) and the sociolinguistics literature (see the discussion article by Kelly-Holmes, 2024, and commentaries on the Journal of Sociolinguistics). Some empirical work suggests that postdigital communicative practice has been significantly impacted by language technologies and AI tools, for instance, in interactions with voice assistants such as Alexa (Leblebici, 2024) and in contexts of migration (see the chapter by Yudystka and Androutsopoulos in this volume). There is also a growing awareness about the potential implications of interactions with GenAI and large language models in terms of cultural change and the amplification of existing cultural biases (Jones, 2025; Schneider, 2022).

Thus, as individuals engage with new technologies, platforms, and digital communities on a daily basis, their interactions with interculturality and their search for culturality are ubiquitous. In this vein, engaging in postdigital intercultural communicative practice means undergoing the above-described sociolinguistic processes while attending to the dynamics of intercultural encounters in the digital space, such as repeated experiences of uncertainty and a constant search for "culturality". Building on these considerations, the following section proposes bringing the analysis of interculturality and postdigital communicative practice together through interdisciplinary work.

5. Analysing interculturality and postdigital communicative practice

Intercultural communication is an interdisciplinary field (Piller, 2012) that has traditionally drawn on a wide range of research methods (see Zhu, 2016, Ed.),

social identities, power relations, and communicative practices (Blommaert & Maly, 2019).

some of which overlap with certain orientations in sociolinguistics. Examples are ethnography (Jackson, 2016), (critical) discourse analysis (O'Regan & Betzel, 2016), and conversation analysis (Brandt & Mortensen, 2016), among others.

Within sociolinguistics, research methods that consider the online-offline nexus have gained prominence in recent years. An early example is Androutsopoulos' discourse-centred online ethnography, which aims to "combine the systematic observation of selected sites of online discourse with direct contact with its social actors" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 2). Another example is Georgakopoulou's use of 'technography' as a methodological approach that examines the interplay between technological platforms and storytelling practices, particularly within social media contexts (Georgakopoulou, 2024). This methodology integrates corpus-assisted narrative analysis to track media affordances and the directives platforms impose on storytelling practices, emphasising the co-construction of narratives through platform design and user interaction. Zappavigna's social semiotic analysis of ambient affiliation in social media corpora, strongly informed by systemic functional linguistics, is another case in point (Zappavigna, 2014; Zappavigna & Ross, 2024). Similarly, the body of research under digital discourse analysis (Vásquez, 2022, Ed.) examines the interplay between language use, social practices, identities, and ideologies across platforms and modalities.

In recent years, digital ethnography has gained traction within and beyond the field of sociolinguistics. This research method, we argue, is potentially productive for a fruitful investigation of interculturality and postdigital communicative practice in specific digital settings, such as social media. Digital ethnography has been defined as a research method "interested in the ways in which people use language, interact with each other, employ discourses, and construct communities, collectives, knowledge, and identities, through and influenced by digital technologies" (Varis & Hou, 2019, p. 230). Digital ethnography studies usually take into account both screen data and user data (Heyd, 2023, p.250), where screen data means that online observation and participation are achieved through discourse analysis of digital communities. User data refers to an ethnographic approach, incorporating participant observation, interviews, and field notes, where users' offline surroundings and practices are taken into account.

Because digital ethnography is a method employed in various disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, business studies, and communication studies, it "offers the perspectives and benefits of transdisciplinary work" (Heyd, 2023, p. 249). Thus, we argue that digital ethnography is a research

method well-positioned to aid the analysis of postdigital *and* intercultural communicative practices.

When deploying any of the methods mentioned in this section, conceptual and methodological questions remain about how to account not only for sociolinguistic and semiotic processes but also for the phenomenon of interculturality. If we want to take postdigital intercultural communicative practice seriously, analysts must scrutinise and account for both (socio)linguistic processes and experiences of interculturality. Attending to both entails addressing the challenges of interdisciplinarity in general and the specific issues involved in the convergence of sociolinguistics (and related disciplines) and intercultural communication more specifically.

The general constraints to interdisciplinarity involve different epistemologies, terminological mismatches, methodological tensions, and collaboration struggles. Moreover, the fields of sociolinguistics and intercultural communication already entail a significant level of interdisciplinarity in themselves, which has been associated with challenges in terms of visibility and recognition. For example, Sommier et al. (2021, p. 12) have argued that "trapped between the looming legacy of cross-cultural communication and the grand aura of cultural studies, intercultural communication sometimes struggles to establish itself" (on the history and epistemologies of intercultural communication studies, see Busch's chapter in this volume).

Despite the challenges involved, we propose that the study of postdigital intercultural communicative practices can significantly benefit from a close examination of both sociolinguistic and intercultural processes. Pragmatically, this can be achieved through interdisciplinary dialogue, such as the kind of collaboration proposed by Rampton and van de Putte (2024) in their effort to bridge memory studies and interactional sociolinguistics. The authors outline two *modes* of interdisciplinary engagement (see also Rampton et al., 2014): In mode 1, focal problems or research questions emerge within a specific discipline, but researchers encounter bottlenecks that require engagement with alternative analytical and conceptual frameworks. In mode 2, by contrast, the problem or research question arises first and is then addressed by a multidisciplinary team that brings together diverse areas of expertise. As Rampton et al. (2014, p. 6) note, mode 2 interdisciplinarity requires "quite a high tolerance for ambiguity", and it is crucial "not to commit too quickly to the specification of the key methods and dimensions of analysis".

However, how do we bring modes 1 and 2 of interdisciplinarity to life in our everyday practices as researchers, usually confined to the *modus operandi*

(or culturality!) of our own fields and academic communities? Rampton and van de Putte propose data sessions as incubators of interdisciplinarity. In laying out how an interdisciplinary data session works, they explain that a "data-bringer" shares a short excerpt (around three minutes) of verbal interaction—usually transcribed and accompanied by audio or video—with a small group of around fifteen people. After a brief contextual introduction, the group listens to or watches the recording multiple times. Participants then spend 15–20 minutes analysing the transcript individually, followed by 60–90 minutes of group discussion. The focus is on open-ended questions such as "What is happening here?" to allow diverse interpretations to emerge. Importantly, the data-bringer remains silent during this discussion and only shares their own analysis in the final 10–15 minutes, reflecting on how the group's insights align with or challenge their original interpretations. This practice is inspired by conversation analysis, whose data sessions focus on the here-and-now of interaction. However, in interdisciplinarity-oriented data sessions of the kind proposed by Rampton and van de Putte, "although the 'facticity of recorded data' is something to check back to throughout a session, interpretations usually go far beyond the structures and processes of interaction itself, and the openness to different interpretative logics allows scholars of interaction, memory, and other traditions to learn from each other" (Rampton & van de Putte, 2024, p. 17).

Therefore, we argue that bringing intercultural studies and sociolinguistics into dialogue through data sessions—potentially incorporating diverse modes of data such as social media posts, comment threads, or TikTok videos—offers a productive means of exploring epistemological alignments and analytical complementarities. During the ReDICo 2024 Encounters, we had the opportunity to experience the potential of such interdisciplinary engagement in a 90-minute data session facilitated by Ben Rampton. In this session, participants analysed excerpts from video-mediated interactions in English as a lingua franca, recorded within a virtual intercultural game environment (see Oliveira, 2024; Oliveira et al., 2024). The discussion was enriched by the contributions of PhD students, early-career scholars, and senior researchers from various universities, who gathered at the *Friedrich Schiller University of Jena* in March 2024. This particular ReDICo Encounters session was organised in collaboration with the *University Association for Intercultural Studies in German-speaking Countries*, which regularly brings together doctoral candidates through colloquia held at different venues across Germany and Austria.

6. Structure of this volume

During the editorial process, we encouraged contributors to reflect on how digitality and interculturality are featured in their theoretical reflections and empirical studies. The contributions to this volume address these complex issues and, at the same time, lay the groundwork for further empirical examinations, as well as theoretical and epistemological reflections, regarding postdigital intercultural communicative practices.

Part 1, *Conceptualising Interculturality, Digitality, and Language: Past, Present, and Future*, comprises two chapters that are complementary in tracing theoretical and epistemological developments in the study of intercultural communication and language. In Chapter 2, Dominic Busch outlines theory development in intercultural communication, which is of crucial importance for a field where theory building has been largely neglected. This outline leads to an incursion into epistemology and ontology, with the author arguing that the disentangling of epistemology and ontology in intercultural theory-building can aid our understanding of the notion of culture in sets of theories categorised within two paradigms: the *difference approach* and the *newness approach*. In short, the difference approach, which presupposes the primacy of epistemology over ontology, outlines the notion of culture as a "gap-filler" between empirical perception and what theories can claim. In contrast, the newness approach rejects this gap by acknowledging the intertwinement of epistemology and ontology and thus of culture and lived experiences. Busch situates posthumanism within the newness approach. According to the author, this approach "may help to open up new horizons in intercultural communication research," and we argue that it may prove productive in further explorations of the entanglement between (post)digitality and interculturality (see also Lenehan, 2025).

While Busch puts intercultural communication theory into perspective in Chapter 3, Britta Schneider and Bettina Migge review language ideologies from colonial times and compare them with current discourses on AI language technologies. The authors conclude that these technologies "represent a continuation of colonial endeavours from the Global North." The chapter makes us acutely aware that "we are currently confronted with a reordering of sociolinguistic realities" and makes the case that the current "digital turn follows a well-trodden and historically shaped path". Thus, the two chapters in Part 1 provide a much-needed overview of how the present or the here-and-now of communicative practice and intercultural communication are entangled in past societal configurations, discourses, and epistemologies. While

Schneider and Migge's chapter highlights the importance of examining the past to create more equitable futures with respect to conceptions of language and language practices, Busch entertains the potential of posthumanism to experiment with the 'radically new' in intercultural communication research and radically change the field in the years to come.

Following these two chapters, we enter Part 2 of the volume, *Understanding Postdigital Practices in a Changing World: Language, Technology, and Culture*, which contains empirical studies focusing on various aspects of postdigital communicative practices. The authors examine Gen-Z social media practices, the communicative practices of forced migrants aided by language technologies, corporate communication across websites, and activism education mediated by video-conferencing technology. In Chapter 4, Alex Georgakopoulou builds on the ethnomethodological concept of 'format'[8] to analyse positioning in stories on social media, including *Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook*, and *Weibo*. The author uses the so-called technographic method to examine both the here-and-now and the historicity of semiotic choices featured in these stories. She demonstrates how specific formats and storytelling approaches—both in terms of telling and engaging with others' stories—are tied to self-presentation strategies. Using examples from *TikTok*, the author illustrates the processes of reconfiguration and repurposing of stories across different platforms. These processes attest to the power of creating and engaging with stories as postdigital communicative practice. Because storytelling formats on social media often transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, these stories feature as a focal phenomenon to be explored for a better understanding of interculturality and postdigital practices. In this vein, the author observes how "the tension between the drive for homogeneity" in story-formats and "users' individual creativity and agentive power" raises questions about "the future of storytelling and storytellers, especially in an era increasingly dominated by *GenAI*, which is only going to increase the drive for replication".

In Chapter 5, Jenia Yudytska and Jannis Androutsopoulos explore how forced migrants, with limited knowledge of the language of their new community, use language technologies (LTs) to address everyday communication challenges. Through interviews and video-recorded re-enactments with six

8 A format is a recognisable pattern or structure of interaction that people use to make sense of everyday social encounters, for instance, typical ways in which telephone conversations start and end (see Garfinkel, 2002).

Ukrainian women in Austria, the authors examine their strategies to overcome linguistic barriers despite limited resources, highlighting the vital role of their co-national community—facing the same struggles simultaneously—in facilitating these strategies. The authors demonstrate that both LTs and human translators are crucial for exercising agency, illustrating not only the experiences of using each resource individually but also their integration through the 'human-in-the-loop' strategy, where individuals are incorporated into workflows reliant on LTs. The study reveals that participants often prefer untrained, ad-hoc interpreters over technology in complex communication situations. However, this reliance on others might burden those assisting, particularly as these helpers typically offer their support without compensation, considering the precarious living conditions of the refugees. While acknowledging that migrants are "at the forefront of adopting digital technologies for interpersonal communication", the authors go further, emphasising the dual pressures they face: the urgent need to communicate effectively and the mental strain imposed by language barriers, which can compound the trauma of forced migration.

The challenges faced by forced migrants described in Chapter 5—linguistic marginalisation, precarious living conditions, and the enduring trauma of displacement—find a compelling resonance in Daniel N. Silva's analysis in Chapter 6, albeit in a different socio-political context. While Silva focuses on youth in Rio de Janeiro's favelas who have grown up within systems of structural exclusion, both cases show how marginalisation—and forms of empowerment—are mediated and negotiated through language. Silva's chapter centres on a Google Meet-based workshop in which young, marginalised participants engage in the *un*learning of colonial, gendered, and racialised norms that sustain the imaginary of (in)securitisation, which frames them as existential threats. The digital space functions here not as an abstract or disembodied medium but as an affective and relational setting, intimately tied to participants' lived realities and embedded in broader regimes of violence, exclusion, and surveillance. It is within this postdigital entanglement of online and offline worlds that the workshop creates a dialogical space where participants reflect on their positionalities, share experiences of structural violence, and co-produce knowledge. Digital tools thus play "a key role in this epistemic transformation" by exposing "the ideological foundations of gendered and racialised oppression", according to Silva. Through multimodal practices, participants articulate the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and militarisation, thereby challenging and reframing entrenched systems

of oppression like patriarchy, racism, and LGBTQI+phobia. At the heart of this process lies what Silva describes as the affective and epistemic labour of "living at the limit," where speaking, sharing experiences, and connecting under duress becomes both a survival strategy and a form of resistance.

Chapter 7, by Nadine Thielemann and Zlatoslava Savych, adds another dimension to the second part of the volume by shifting the focus to the corporate sphere and analysing postdigital sustainability communication in the oil and gas industry. Based on a comparative analysis of corporate websites from companies in the United States, Austria, Poland, and Russia, the authors examine how global sustainability discourses emerge from the interplay between international standards and local sociopolitical contexts. Corporate communication in this context must negotiate the demands of global frameworks—such as sustainability reporting standards and stakeholder expectations—while simultaneously responding to nationally specific regulatory, cultural, and political conditions. This negotiation is evident in linguistic and communicative choices, particularly how language (English vs. national languages) influences the visibility, reach, and legitimacy of sustainability narratives. These dynamics are further shaped by the affordances of the medium: corporate websites, as predominantly one-directional (Web 1.0) platforms, are not designed for dialogue but for strategic message control. They define who is addressed, which narratives are foregrounded, and how sustainability is framed—thereby functioning as tools of communicative boundary-setting. In examining how companies frame the Triple Bottom Line (economic, environmental, and social sustainability), the chapter shows that while all firms link sustainability to shareholder value, significant rhetorical differences persist. U.S. companies emphasise diversity and inclusion,[9] Russian and Polish firms emphasise corporate philanthropy and patriotism, and the Austrian company shifts between these two orientations. Interpreted through the lens of glocalisation, these patterns reveal how corporate sustainability communication is shaped by both global convergence and local differentiation—offering insights into the cultural hybridity that characterises corporate discourse in the digital realm, which is also embedded in particular historical discourses. Furthermore, the authors argue

9 During the final revision of this chapter, completed in May 2025, we were compelled to reflect on how unfolding geopolitical developments—such as the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. political scene—can rapidly reshape the trajectory of digital corporate discourse.

that "sustainability communication in the digital age is not merely a replication of global best practices but a dynamic process shaped by the intersection of global trends, local demands, and the unique affordances of digital media."

Offering sociocultural insights into meaning-making within postdigital communicative environments, Part 3—*Contextualising Digital Interculturality: Between Connectivities and Exclusions*—turns to the concept of digital interculturality as developed over four years of joint interdisciplinary research within the joint project *Researching Digital Interculturality Co-operatively* (ReDICo). Thus, in Chapter 8, Luisa Conti, Fergal Lenehan, Roman Lietz, and Milene Oliveira argue that intercultural communication in postdigital societies must be reconceptualised in light of the infrastructural, algorithmic, and economic architectures shaping digital platforms. The chapter outlines how these architectures are not neutral but actively reproduce historically developed power asymmetries through processes of *digital colonialism*. It explains how "[t]hese asymmetries are not external to the epistemic architectures of the AI-infused internet, [but] they are constitutive of it." These layers profoundly shape how communication, interaction, and understanding unfold within digital environments, significantly influencing wider societal transformation processes. Digital interculturality, as framed in the chapter, is not an additional layer to 'traditional' intercultural exchange; it constitutes the very condition of living in postdigital societies. Communication is no longer separable from the technological systems that mediate it, and cultural meaning is co-constructed through processes of algorithmic visibility, platform governance, and digital normativity. Drawing on the contextual dependency of meaning, the authors argue that, therefore, an expanded understanding of context is needed, one that includes not only social and spatial but also infrastructural and computational dimensions. Moreover, they insist that this transformation calls for a shift from static, identity-based models of intercultural competence to more critical, processual, and infrastructural literacy, capable of grappling with how cultural forms are rendered (in)visible, amplified, or suppressed. The chapter highlights the paradoxes of digital life: while digital platforms foster connectivity and the emergence of hybrid, fluid identities, they also impose (new) exclusions, standardisations, and forms of soft coercion. The authors argue that understanding the complexity of these dynamics and rethinking the internet as a cultural infrastructure is an urgent and necessary task for fostering more equitable forms of (post-)digital interculturality.

This volume ultimately reflects the very scholarly event that inspired it: an encounter of diverse theoretical, empirical, and epistemological perspec-

tives—an engagement that is neither simple nor seamless but both challenging and necessary. We invite readers to engage with all chapters, even when they traverse unfamiliar conceptual terrains, disciplinary conventions, or bodies of literature. Levels of familiarity with textual organisation and references will naturally vary. Still, it is precisely in confronting the unfamiliar (or, in other words, the 'intercultural') that the potential for new insights emerges. We thus hope the volume encourages readers to remain open to new connections—whether they resonate now or spark reflection in the future.

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