

Intercultural Dialogue — An Overrated Means of Acquiring Understanding Examined in the Context of Christian Mission to Africa

Jim Harries

Bible Teacher in Kenya; Research Student at the University of Birmingham UK

Email: jimoharries@gmail.com

Abstract

Intercultural dialogue is at depth impossible, because mutual understanding is only possible in so far as cultures and languages used are common, and not different. Assuming the wrong topic of conversation will result in a realisation of error and not productive progress. Having a common language (such as English) alone does not bring mutual understanding because languages are integrally rooted in cultures. Conversations always being engaged with a view to potential and actual overhearers of all sorts, means that mutual understanding requires a clear knowledge of overhearers on both sides. Power issues and types of reasoning often being in the context and not the content of dialogue means that failure to realise the context from which someone is dialoguing is in effect misunderstanding.

Keywords

dialogue, mission, Africa, intercultural, pragmatics, Christian, linguistics, power, reason, translation

Introduction

Dialogue is sometimes seen as the ‘cure all’ for communication failures in intercultural contexts. If only there were sufficient opportunity for careful dialogue, some appear to say, many of the world’s issues would be solved. This article draws on pragmatic linguistics to question this assumption. The focus in this article is on ‘dialogue’ between (sub-Saharan) African and Western people. I hope that the observations made here will result in missionaries and other intercultural workers having the desire to share in the lives of the people they are reaching as a prerequisite to serious attempts at dialogue with them. My motivation for writing arises from problematic understandings that arise from dialogues engaged in that bypass this step.

Dialogue is often understood from the term 'dia-' as being a discussion that occurs between two individuals, such as the representatives of two different groups. It can also be used to refer to 'discussion' more generically. I make the case in this article, that there are always more than two participants in a 'dialogue', and that acquiring understanding for practical purposes requires having a mutual culture as well as a mutual language.

1. The Limitations of Dialogue

Dialogue can be extremely effective in assisting two people to understand one another, if they already have a significant foundation for mutual comprehension. That is, if the dialogue is concerned with a part of a mutually recognised and acknowledged body of understanding, that conversants then articulate in ways that are mutually comprehensible in anticipated ways. Thus it is good at resolving difficulties or improving comprehension between people of the same worldview, culture, background or training.

For example, dialogue is a good and helpful means of discussing a book if it has been read by two different people of similar backgrounds. It is obviously not very helpful if, unknown to them, the people attempting to engage about a book have mistakenly read different books, except to get them to the position where they understand that they have made this error. It can be as unhelpful if the two people's approaches to a book are very different. For example, if one is concerned with checking the grammar, and another with enjoying the flow of the narrative.

Dialogue is good and helpful if the parties concerned have a mutual language to engage in. One monolingual person entering a dialogue using Russian while another speaks French is obviously going to be of very limited benefit to either. The potential for dialogue being helpful grows as the languages used come to be more closely related. A monolingual French speaking person dialoguing with a Spaniard may achieve much more significant mutual understanding because French and Spanish are more closely related than are French and Russian. A dialogue between people speaking a different dialect of the same language will have yet more potential for success, and of course the greatest potential for success arises if the same dialect of the same language from the same region is used in the discourse concerned.

Another example; two football players could helpfully dialogue on how best to improve a particular team. There will be less potential for good dialogue should they inadvertently be discussing different teams, and even less should

they mistakenly be discussing different sports. For example should one person be discussing soccer (known in England as 'football') while another is assuming that the discussion is about American football. Dialogue is effective where the subject of the dialogue is mutually known.

A prior step of finding common ground is often required before helpful dialogue can be engaged. This may be considered a useful part of the dialogue, such as someone's discovering that an engine being discussed is a diesel and not a petrol engine, appears to be typical of the kinds of helpful processes that dialogues evoke. Assuming, that is, that this person is familiar with a diesel engine. If not, then the dialogue becomes a time of instruction in which a colleague must explain what a diesel engine is and how it works before further progress can be made. The same applies to the example of sport above. In the above language example, either one party must learn Russian or the other French for the dialogue to continue. Dialogues may require periods of teaching and learning to bring participants together before they can be effective.

To summarise, we have in this section found 'dialogue' to be helpful in situations where there is mutual knowledge and experience. We will continue to see its limitations in intercultural communication in which this mutuality is, almost by the very definition of the term 'intercultural', limited.

2. Dialogue Requires a Common Language

In the absence of a translator, dialogue requires a common language. (We will see below that in fact, even with translation, dialogue still requires a common language, in the pragmatic sense.) One key question then is, which language? I will try to show below how the choice of language can profoundly affect the form of a dialogue.

I will take my example by comparing two quite familiar and closely related European languages: English and German, and indicate the importance of language choice by focusing on three commonly used words; bread (*Brot*), bicycle (*Fahrrad*) and wife (*Frau*). (Note that according to German grammar nouns begin with capital letters.) I will look at these words in terms of their implicatures, and not primarily in terms of their meanings as may be found in a dictionary. I will consider the implications of using these words in one language rather than in another.

Brot in Germany is usually more colourful and varied than bread in Britain. Rye is frequently a component. *Brotchen* (small bread or bread rolls) are especially favoured for breakfast. German people will think nothing of having *Brot* as staple for two meals daily. Bread in Britain on the other hand, is very often

sliced, white, and mass produced to be sold pre-wrapped in plastic bags in supermarkets. It is invariably made of wheat and not rye, and generally eaten for just one meal daily, or less. Germans are proud of the precision engineering going into their upright stout and sturdy *Fahrrad*, on which brakes are often applied by peddling backwards. English bicycles are more likely to be light weight for racing. Brakes are hand applied, and reliability is considered more important than engineering tradition for bicycles. Bicycle lights are battery powered, whereas *Fahrrad* lights are dynamo powered. 'Frau' translates the English wife (my wife = *meine Frau*), woman (the woman = *die Frau*) and Mrs. (Mrs. Smith is *Frau Smith*). The word that is historically related to 'wife' in English is the German word *Weib*, which is an offensive word to use. It is said that a German *Frau* is proud of the fact that she works hard to keep her house spotlessly clean and tidy. English women's houses are often comparatively unkempt.¹

Assuming the above to be broadly true, and assuming (I believe correctly) that similar differences can be found throughout the vocabulary of these two languages, the choice of languages becomes consequential. Saying that we should have *Brot* for lunch (made of rye, multi coloured, more emphasis on taste than on mass production) is in a sense very different from saying we should have bread for lunch. Saying that someone loves riding his bike (likes going fast down the hills) is also different from saying he likes to ride his *Fahrrad* (has a gratifying feeling of smartly propelling a sophisticated machine along the road). There are serious dangers in translating the equivalent word to wife (*Weib*) in German, because *Weib* is a very impolite term for a woman. Translating Mr. and Mrs. Smith into *Herr* and *Frau* Smith literally translated back to English could be Lord and Woman (lady?) Smith. Are such differences inconsequential?

The choice of language would seem to be consequential, But, my reader may choose to point out, that this is simply because a language is associated with a culture. Two English people choosing to say *Fahrrad* instead of 'bike' or *Frau* instead of 'Mrs.' would surely attach English meanings and implicatures to those words? Especially if they have no knowledge of the differences between German and English cultures.

Such simple attaching of English meanings and implicatures to German words may become difficult, if on further exploring the German language the English discover that *Frau* covers 'Mrs.' 'woman' and 'wife', or that *Fahrrad*

¹ While I believe the contents of this paragraph to be broadly true, I ask readers to accept any inaccuracies they find in these descriptions so as to allow me to use them for purposes of illustration in this article.

actually translates as 'drive wheel'. In other words, word for word correspondence may not work, even in the absence of cultural exposure to the other. The vexed question of linguistic determinism makes an appearance. Does the term *Fahrrad* mean that German cyclists will be more free to use monocycles and tricycles, which the English word *bicycle* theoretically excludes? Is it culturally more difficult (or easier) for a woman to be single in German speaking than in English speaking countries, because the same word is used for 'woman' as for 'wife'? Whorf's name has been particularly strongly associated with the belief that: 'Linguistic patterns determine what the individual perceives in his world and how he thinks about it.'² Scholars these days accept that there is some truth in this.

We would probably be right to say, contrary to Whorf's more extreme claims of linguistic determinism, that English people using the German language while living in England and engaging with the English culture, will adapt this language to the English context.³ (This will be confusing to a German should he then find his language being 'abused' in this way.) Then, except to the extent that the structure of a language itself dictates meaning, what is more critical in a dialogue is not the language used, but the culture to which that language is being fitted in the mind of the person using it. Whether English or German is used in a dialogue between an English and a German person, the important question is whether it is the English or the German culture that underlies the conversation. (Bearing in mind of course that language in the absence of an assumed culture or context in its use is meaningless. For example, for the word 'chair' (or any other word) to be meaningful someone must have an idea in their mind as to what 'chair' refers to, and that idea will be coloured, (or determined) by the culture or context that the person has in mind.) If both parties are clear in which cultural context they are using their language (English or German) then, assuming that their knowledge of that particular culture is mutual, they should understand one another relatively well.

² George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, 92. Much has been said over the years about the ways in which language can determine the nature of thought, and in turn the course of life. Benjamin Lee Whorf (circa 1897-1941) continues to be renowned for having made the case that a language will determine the way in which people think. See Penny Lee, 'Benjamin Lee Whorf', in: Jeff Verschueren, Janola Ostman and Jan Blommaert (eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company 1995, 1-21.

³ Contrary to the extremes of the theory of language determinism which would force us to conclude that either the German language cannot be used in respect to the English culture, or that its use will, of itself, 'Germanise' the English.

This requirement for dialogue to occur in the framework of a mutually understood context (culture) in order to enable clear communication, has unfortunately already disqualified many so called 'intercultural' exchanges. That is, whereas intercultural communication assumes that dialogue is possible across cultural boundaries, we have found that it is only truly possible in so far as a culture is common. Having a common language such as English is not sufficient, because the language following the contours of respective cultures will mean that it will be being used and understood in very different ways by the two parties to the dialogue. Strictly then, dialogue is only practical intra culturally. That is, familiarity with a people's culture is a prerequisite for clear dialogue with them.

The examples of English and German that I have chosen above for illustration are closely related languages and peoples. The intercultural gap is much wider in other cases, such as between European peoples and languages and African peoples and languages that form the main focus for this article.

The reader should appreciate that the kind of differences that I allude to above can soon get very serious in practical communication situations. The chosen examples can illustrate this. Calling a German woman a *Weib* is serious abuse. Sending someone to buy a bicycle and they get a tricycle can be serious. Expecting Germans to eat stodgy tasteless sliced white bread when they are used to freshly cooked crusty tasty rolls made of various grains, could be serious, and so on. This study of just three words has shown entering into dialogue with Germans while profoundly unfamiliar with their culture can very quickly mark one out as an outsider and could have other negative consequences. How much more in the case of Europeans engaging with African people.

3. The Role of Overhearers

We have in the above section assumed that the two people engaging in a dialogue are alone. But is there ever a situation where a dialogue is actually confined to two people? Geographically, and in terms of a limited time and a limited context, perhaps. So Bill can have a conversation with Jane while they are walking by themselves on their way to work. Even in the case of such a conversation however I suggest, there are actually a multitude of 'overhearers'.

An overhearer is someone who a speaker is not directly communicating with, but who will pick up all or a part of the message concerned, and of the context of the message concerned. Their having only a partial grasp of either

message or context means that an overhearer will interpret differently to the listener being overtly targeted by the speaker. Because in pragmatics we learn that word (sentence and text) meanings arise only in interaction with a context,⁴ so as context or order or combination of words changes so meaning changes, indicating that overhearers are at risk of misunderstanding.

Examples will illustrate the different kinds of overhearers that we need to consider, and the dilemmas that result. I will begin with the more obvious examples. Let's imagine that a man is with his wife in a crowded place when he meets his mistress whom he has repeatedly assured that he is unmarried. Both the wife and the mistress are initially blissfully ignorant of the identity of the other person. The mistress talking to the man while ignorant of the identity of the other bystander, thinks that she is engaging in dialogue. The man, while acutely aware that the situation is one of *trilogie*, is determined not to reveal this either to his wife or the mistress. The responses of the man, unless he is extremely gifted, are likely to appear incoherent to the mistress given her assumption of dialogue. She is likely in due course to put two and two together, and to the embarrassment and consternation of her lover, realize the actual *trilogie* going on. One way of recognizing a *trilogie* situation is when the behaviour of a partner in dialogue indicates the presence of another person.

A closely related example would be that of a pupil (B) who is unaware that the teacher is in their classroom, whispering something to a fellow pupil (C). B would be baffled by C's unresponsiveness, until B realized that the teacher was standing right behind him or her.

Third parties can be brought into conversations, whether or not they are within earshot. If my boss tells me that I need to move to work in a different factory 10 miles further from my home, I can tell him that my wife will not be happy with that. From here on my boss has to contend with this third party in the conversation. He will be aware that my bringing her into the conversation in her physical absence enables me to put words into her mouth, but that such putting of my words into her mouth has boundaries related to the possibility of my boss calling her to join the conversation or speaking to her later. I am unlikely to say that my wife would rather commit suicide than have me work further away, if this was going to threaten my relationship with my wife should my boss report this revelation to her. Hence certain conventions limit the role of my wife in this conversation within flexible boundaries.

Having pointed out that I can add a third party who is largely unknown to the other participant of the dialogue in this way, one can ask whether this third

⁴ Geoffrey H. Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics*, London and New York: Longman 1983, 6.

party was not actually there already? A wise boss speaking to a married employee would surely be constantly aware of a partner's influence on his worker's behaviour, state of mind, motivation, performance etc. He will be aware that his telling his employee unexpectedly that 'you must work all night till tomorrow' will immediately take the employee's mind to the consequence of doing this on his wife and children. Added to the wife and children, there is his mother who has been nagging him to move his family nearer to her home, there is his good friend who has offered him a more pleasant job but with less pay, then there is even his late father who while still alive had always advised his son to be self employed so as to avoid getting aggro (problems) from his boss. All these people are now playing a role in this 'dialogue'.

While all these people may be physically absent from this conversation, they may well be potentially present, and the boss needs to be aware of this. The man could report to his wife 'he said so and so' which could have her get upset and thus affect the decision of her husband. The children of this man may be friends with the boss' children at the same school, and an over rash decision on the boss' part could have his children come home disliking their father because their friends at school were upset over the implications for their father of the decision made by him. So there are any number of people potentially and actually involved in the 'dialogue' going on between boss and employee.

My point here is that there are always absent participants in conversations. The same applies on the African mission scene. My African colleagues may or may not be aware of my 'supporters' whims. My assumptions regarding the view of my supporters from Europe may have me reject off hand a course of action that can appear very reasonable and helpful to the African people advising me. At the same time a course of action that could appear very reasonable to me may be rejected by my African colleagues because of some anticipated reaction to it by their extended family, clan, ancestor and so on. As it may be hard for me to explain just why my distant supporters may prefer one course of action over another, so for the African person it can be hard to explain to a Western missionary just how negative the response of their family may be to what could seem to the missionary to be a very helpful course to follow. For example Maranz tells us just how offensive it is in an African community to seek to hold someone accountable for donated funds.⁵

Allow me to add some more examples of how third parties enter into dialogues:

⁵ David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: observations from Africa*. Dallas: SIL International 2001, 38.

- A child visits the home of her friend when no adults are present, and then as they talk the visiting child puts her feet and shoes onto the sofa she is sitting on. Her friend may suddenly become tense, knowing what her mother would say were she there.
- A German person wanting to engage in serious dialogue with an Englishman, may be unaware that the Englishman had been told by a reputable authority 'never trust a German'.
- The very tenets of the Islamic Shia religion authorizes its followers to deceive non-believers over what they actually believe.⁶
- There are some widows who continue to plan and orient their lives to please husbands that may be long dead.
- Unbeknown to you, a certain woman is very friendly and helpful to you even though you have met her for the very first time, because you remind her of her son.

In the latter example, the woman's behaviour to you may well be motivated by the death of her son. Her seeing you as somehow replacing her lost son, is an example of a way in which the dead continue to affect dialogues amongst the living. This kind of effect is particularly marked amongst certain people in the world, many African people included, to whom the dead are never truly dead and can be very active amongst the living community while they remain in living memory.⁷ In these cases the dead not only speak through the legacy they left when they were alive, but can continue to listen in to conversations and to speak after they have died — particularly in dreams. In Africa these living dead are often known as having some evil intent.⁸ Hence in the African context knowledge is concealed through fear that evil powers (spirits), assumed to be constantly eaves dropping (overhearing), could turn it against you.⁹ This has a major impact on dialogue with people of or affected by African cultures that has a mas-

⁶ The doctrine of *taqiya* allows a Shia Muslim '... to lie and deceive and deny what they really believe, so long as they continue to adhere to the belief in their hearts' (Patrick Sookhdeo, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Islam*, Ross-shire (Scotland): Christian Focus Publications 2002, 66-67).

⁷ Anita Juntunen, *Professional and Lay Care in the Tanzanian Village of Ilembula*, academic dissertation to be presented with the assent of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Oulu, for public discussion in the Auditorium of Kajaani Polytechnic on September 21, 2001, citing John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Publishers 1994), <http://herkules oulu.fi/isbn9514264312/html/x254.html> (accessed June 14, 2007).

⁸ African spirits have in recent times increasingly become known as evil (Jim Harries, *Pragmatic Theory Applied to Christian Mission in Africa: With Special Reference to Luo Responses to 'Bad' in Gem, Kenya*, PhD thesis, Birmingham: University of Birmingham 2007, 58).

⁹ Harries, *Pragmatic Theory*, 44.

sive effect on the possible boundaries of engagement. Imagine someone who is setting out to destroy or kill you being able to overhear all your conversations.

How then are we to consider 'dialogues' in the light of the above? We have found that overhearers of many different kinds form part of the context that in turn determine the direction of dialogues. The presence of overhears speaking into people's heads means that we could redefine dialogues as polylogues. Kerbrat-Orecchioni tells us that polylogues are very flexible, unstable and unpredictable.¹⁰ Then there is no such thing as a dialogue in the sense that two people freely discuss with one another. If we continue to call such discussions 'dialogues', then we should be aware that participants in dialogues are attending to unseen overhearers and contributors to the conversation in question. For the purposes of this article, I prefer to say that there is no such thing as 'dialogue' in the real sense, but I will continue to use the term dialogue to refer to people who are conversing with each other. (This could be by phone, face to face, over the internet, through a handshake or wink, in writing letters, even in exchanging glances and so on.)

Dialogue in the sense of being a mutually enlightening conversation between two people can work to the extent to which overhearers are mutually known. Unknowns, who are clearly there in intercultural dialogue by its very definition, easily render dialogue as ineffective as if participants were using different languages, because amongst the contextual factors that determine what can be said, how it is to be said, and what it is to mean and so on, are the overhearers.

Christians carry the message of one true and loving God. God's presence should be a demotion of other 'overhearers' to a secondary status, thus giving Christians their confidence in contexts where others are fearful, especially of the activities of the dead and of witches, but also of fellow human beings. This is one basis for the strength and worldwide unity of the church.

4. Power Issues

There are many ways of concealing one's power interests in a society or community. Many of these are very socially normal and acceptable. Such concealment can however result in difficulties when it comes to dialogue. As with the above considerations, power issues often become apparent in a wider context rather than in words used in a dialogue. They are also culturally defined and therefore culturally relative. All this means that they are easily missed in an intercultural exchange.

¹⁰ Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 'Introducing Polylogue', *Journal of Pragmatics* 36 (2004), 1-24.

Courting procedures are a complex example of such power play. The agenda of 'boy meets girl' is in a sense as clear as a bell, but in another sense often carefully occluded by culturally related insinuations. The failure to grasp these, and for these to work together within the wider social scene can be very problematic in intercultural boy girl dialogue. Courtship procedures illustrate how apparently innocuous activities are actually oriented to a clearly self interested goal. A dialogue between a boy and a girl does not have to overtly mention marriage and sexual relations for these to be a part of the picture. When a single girl comes looking for a job, for example, one can never be sure that she is not more intent on finding a husband. This is implicit in her singleness. A similar circumstance arises when considering other power issues.

Some examples of power interests in intercultural exchanges will illustrate their complexity. Is the Iraq war currently engaged in by America to do with oil or not? No carefully worded statements will totally erase this notion from people's minds, because the context (massive wealth producing oil fields in Iraq) speaks louder than any words ever could. The Christian-Muslim dialogue is beset with a similar issue. Will there ever be such dialogue in which Christians are not intent to convert Muslims to their faith, or Muslims Christians to theirs? Anyone aware of the context of such debates will know that such intent is there, even though it may never be overtly mentioned. If such a major issue can be there in the context but not the content of a debate, one must ask oneself just what else may be concealed rather than revealed in words used in exchanges? Businessmen interested in clinching a deal will try to convince. Their primary objective is not to set out the total picture in order to communicate truth, but to get to a position where they can make a profit. Here is another somewhat hidden (in any individual transaction) context — the profit motive. Those who remain ignorant of this motive are liable to be exploited.

It should be clear that a (or the) key to the understanding of many dialogues is found outside of the actual words used, in the context of their use. Power interests are often the ones being concealed. A failure to realise this and be aware of 'real' interests such as the interest in profit by a businessman making a sale, can result in one being exploited or certainly appearing naïve. What then are the hidden power games played and issues involved in Christian mission from the wealthy West to the poor in Africa? Could it not be that wealthy people who are promoting their beliefs using their money are drawing the attention that they are due to the latter, even if this is never mentioned in actual dialogue? (Or even if this is overtly refuted in dialogue?) Numerous other concealed power concerns may also be at stake.

On careful consideration I suggest that actually to expect this not to be the case is unrealistic. Rather, it is to be expected that people, even if not actually businessmen as implied above, will be interested in promoting their own financial and material well being. In contexts such as Africa in which relative poverty abounds this becomes a particularly important consideration, and even if not overtly mentioned may still underlie all negotiations (dialogue) with Westerners. As in business, salesmen are not expected to tell customers that 'my interest in you is for my own profit' (such is an accepted norm), so neither will African recipients of foreign mission moneys necessarily make the dominance of the financial interests known to donors. As in other dialogues — the real issues may be found in the context of dialogues, and not in the words themselves.

Does this matter? Is it a problem to find that recipients of Western mission efforts are in it for the money? Yes, I suggest it is, at least because the Westerners involved are rendered ignorant in the process. Also because it is a foundationally unchristian way of operating. The New Testament mentions this temptation and this danger: Christ was tempted to 'buy' followers by turning stones into bread, but he refused in Matthew 4:3-4. In John 6:26 Jesus accuses people of following him for 'bread', and indeed many left him (John 6:66) when they discovered that material provision was not his purpose. Christ avoided it, by making 'himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,¹¹ being made in human likeness...' (Philippians 2:7. NIV). Instead of utilising the power that he had, Christ 'did not consider equality with God something to be grasped...' (Philippians 2:6 NIV), very unlike many missionary and 'development' efforts from the West to Africa today, which are grasping for financial and other forms of power to assist them in fulfilling their task. Also because this way of operating promotes the prosperity Gospel, with all that this entails. And it results in grossly unhelpful dependency. Any initiatives in the church in Africa may have to be Western or Western backed (so Western approved) in order to achieve legitimacy, because God's word is only accepted as legitimate when it looks foreign and is accompanied by money. Finally and perhaps the alternative to the last point would be that it promotes operation through a process of corruption and/or lies, that is hardly very appropriate for the Christian church.

The basic nature of intercultural dialogue is vastly different between the West and the non-West. Westerners enter into it voluntarily when and if they feel like it, and are generally free to opt in or out. For more and more people

¹¹ The Greek is *doulos*, a slave (Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear NRSV-NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English*, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House 1993).

in Africa, it is their lifeline that dominates and dictates the rest of their existence. Opting out is not an option, unless poverty. This is like a marriage in which the husband (the West) can choose to go from partner to partner, while the wife (Africa) must be seen to be faithful if she is not to lose the ongoing source of her material existence. The creation of such situations of international dependence of the life and existence of one on the whim of another is, I suggest, immoral.

Another consideration under this heading of power issues, is the way in which power and relationships are expressed in covert and guarded ways. Verbal commitments entered into in Africa are nothing like as binding as those in the West, as Egner discovered in the Ivory Coast.¹² (An African friend promised to attend her function, even though he knew that at the time he would be at another distant town.) Time is often understood differently — 10:00 a.m. meetings beginning at 11:30 a.m. or 12:00 noon is not unusual. Even should meetings begin 'on time', it is accepted in Africa that many people will continue coming after they have begun. Talking about food as one eats, that I have found to be very common in the USA, is considered inappropriate in the parts of Western Kenya with which I am familiar. Two men holding hands as they walk, understood as raising suspicion that they are gay in the West, is a perfectly normal way of behaving to express healthy friendship in the parts of Africa known to me. Terms like 'having a girl friend' that are acceptable and normal for young people in many Western Christian circles, imply illicit sexual relationship and therefore immorality in many African Christian contexts. Words, even if in the same language, have different meanings in one part of the world as against another. These differences are often not grasped in the course of dialogue alone, particularly when the dialogue is in written form or at a distance and so excluding the option of mutual cultural exposure. The differences begin to be grasped when interacting in someone's living context. Differences become apparent through observation in context and not in the course of dialogue alone.

5. Different Types of Reasoning

Amongst particularly consequential differences between peoples that can be concealed rather than revealed in their dialogues, are types of reasoning. These

¹² Inge Egner, 'The Speech Act of Promising in an Intercultural Perspective', *SIL International* 2002, <http://www.sil.org/silewp/2002/001/silew P2002-001.pdf> (accessed January 8, 2003).

are so central to much of life, and so implicit in peoples behaviour and actions, as often to be excluded from view in discussions. That is, people are so convinced of the universality and correctness of their own reasoning systems, as to make it difficult to perceive, never mind appreciate or value, someone else's. But, I suggest, differences between European and African ways of reasoning are very significant. In brief, African reasoning is ritualistic, heart based or magical, whereas Western reason is much more strongly rooted in the laws of science.¹³

Such differences can for a long time remain in the context rather than the content of a dialogue — particularly if one international language is used in that dialogue. (The differences between the parties in the dialogue will be in the content and implicature invested in words, and not in the words themselves). A few examples will illustrate these differences.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have captured people's attention by their claim to be able to alleviate poverty.¹⁴ Few will contest such an admirable aim. Questions arise regarding the real possibility of implementation and not in the desirability of the end, although it is by confusing these two (assuming that a desire to solve a problem is sufficient in order to bring the resolution) that contributes to the success of the MDG's attempts to acquire supporters. It is ironic that promoters of MDGs end up ignoring the root causes of the poverty that they attempt to resolve, through their failure to realize the contextually rooted implications of African language uses. While planning is guided by Western reason rooted in science, implementation is based on magical¹⁵ reasoning rooted in ritual, prayer and belief in blessings that counter the effects of demons. Instead of 'teaching someone to fish' (surely connected to the worldview of Western peoples) the MDGs are busy giving out fish — demonstrating what can be done from a Western worldview

¹³ Jim Harries, 'The Magical Worldview in the African Church: What is Going on?', *Missiology: An International Review* 24/4 (2000), 487-502; 'Heart-Led Development: An East African Study', submitted to Oxford Centre for Mission Studies for the IDR (Institute for Development Research) Workshop on *The Integration of Christian Mission and Transformational Development: Practical Implications*, September 20-21, 2004, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/heart_led.htm (accessed June 1, 2005).

¹⁴ There are eight goals that 192 *United Nations member states* have agreed to try to achieve by the year 2015, see website UN Millennium Development Goals, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/index.html>, consulted December 1, 2007; website *Wikipedia*, sub voce United Nations, Millennium Development Goals, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations#Millennium_Development_Goals, consulted December 1, 2007).

¹⁵ I understand that this kind of use of the term 'magical' may be offensive to some. I refer them to Harries, 'The Magical Worldview'.

perspective — while the latter remains out of reach of the people, whose magical outlook on life is ignored, or even promoted by MDG activities. (Magical processes can be given credit for the prosperity that arises from MDG activities). Opportunities for all sorts of corrupt practices are in the meantime also provided, thus adding to already rampant levels of financial abuse.

I will list more examples of practical differences between these types of reasoning:

- Illness is in the West a mal function of biological processes, whereas in much of Africa it is caused by untoward spirits, witches, breaking of taboos, curses and so forth. Medicines in African languages are products that are effective against such maladies, such that Western medicine must from the African perspective be either limited in its effect in only dealing with symptoms, or must itself have anti witchcraft powers. The latter understanding obviously has ongoing ramifications for the ways in which medicines are used.
- ‘We must raise funds’ sounds like a collective activity, but when stated by a Westerner in much of Africa means ‘from the West’.¹⁶
- Is the solution for water borne diseases to be found in prayer, repentance, an animal sacrifice, or in scientific treatment of the water supply?
- Is a woman’s barrenness to be resolved by her being examined by a biologically trained physician, or by a curse being removed through a ritual that includes the slaughter of a goat?
- Is the need for a road a question of praying, begging, or using one’s own efforts to repair or build?

In each of the above cases the implications underlying contributions to a dialogue may be worlds apart between a Westerner and an African, even if the language used is the same.

Finally, we can have dialogues occurring over issues that are not usually available for discussion at all. The attempt to bring sexual activity into street level conversations in Africa on the part of Aids campaigners is one such. Whether or not they have had success, and whether that degree of success has actually

¹⁶ It is rarely realised that the requirement to raise a proportion of funds ‘locally’ may, once someone has started to receive donors, be met by using one donor to provide funds that will enable the flow of finance from another. That is, a proportion of the funds provided by donor A can be used to facilitate the flow of funds from donor B, if B insists that s/he will not provide until s/he sees that ‘local’ money has been raised.

resulted in constraining rather than aggravating extra marital sexual activity is an important question. It may be that potential recipients of aid will engage in 'bedroom talk' in public only to please donors, and then maintain traditional taboos for the sake of social sanctity and acceptability once they are out of earshot. Many other issues that Westerners may like African people to talk about, even as simple as the welfare and prosperity of their own children, are taboo in different African cultures.¹⁷ These kinds of constraints put Western reason way out of African people's reach. Being fed by fruits that they cannot themselves produce can be at the very least frustrating, but also dependence creating, and generative in due course of corruption and disillusionment.

Conclusion

We have looked at intercultural dialogue, focusing particularly on that between Africa and the West. We have seen some very severe limitations — as dialogue uses words whose meanings and impacts arise from cultures that are by definition itself (in so far as we are considering intercultural exchange) different. Dialogue is fruitful if it occurs between people who already know and understand one another's cultures and contexts. Otherwise, it may create confusion and harmful and potentially harmful misunderstandings. At best, intercultural dialogue is a form of learning about the other. As someone in the first year of an undergraduate programme at a university is not put in charge of a business or factory, so someone beginning to enter into intercultural dialogue should not give undue weight to what they hear.

Dialogue itself is most fruitful within a common context. For a Westerner to learn about an African (and vice versa) through dialogue, it should be over an extended period of years while both are sharing the context which is being explored. It is most helpfully engaged in using a local and not an international language, and is certainly hindered if one party responds in powerful (for example financial) ways, especially while the dialogue is still in its early stages.

Jim Harries (b. 1964) is a Brit who has lived and worked in Zambia from 1988 to 1991 and then in Kenya from 1993 to date. His primary occupation is Bible teaching, especially to members of indigenous churches using the Kiswahili and Dholuo languages in which he is fluent, as well as English. He is also a fluent German speaker, and once knew Kikaonde, a Zambian language. He has recently completed a PhD in Theology (that drew heavily on linguistics, anthropology and missiology) by extension with the University of Birmingham in the UK.

¹⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann 1969, 198.