Revisiting the 'third space' in language and intercultural studies

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou and Nick Pilcher

The Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

In this special issue following on from the IALIC annual conference 'Interrogating the "Third Space": Negotiating meaning and performing "culture"' (held at Edinburgh Napier University in 2017), we present a series of papers contesting the concept of 'third space' in intercultural communication. The concept, or perhaps more effectively a metaphor, of 'third space' has attracted attention in a range of social sciences that inquire about human *encounters* across time and space, such as anthropology, sociology, education, communication studies, linguistics, human geography, and archaeology. Usually traced to the postcolonial cultural critic Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994) as a founding scholar, this metaphor has also been used and has morphed into areas of scholarship particularly pertinent to our field in language and intercultural communication. In the context of the longstanding discussion surrounding binary cultural categories, the appeal of 'third space' seems self-explanatory: it draws our central focus beyond the entities that interlocutors are conceivably 'locked into' towards a new site opened up between interlocutors, thereby adding a conceptual lens to our debate about *cross*-cultural and/or *inter*-cultural communication.

Elsewhere in the social sciences, the fuzziness of the 'third space' in contemporary usage has laid this concept – along with its companions including cultural 'diversity', 'hybridity' and 'liminality' – open to scepticism. For example, in anthropology, questions are raised on the reductive orientation in Bhabha's description of the liminal dimension of the 'third space'. To Thomassen (2014), Bhabha overlooks the formative re-structuring properties of liminality and treats it as 'simply a positive expression of cultural hybridity', a position which 'entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy', reifies 'the world before us', and fixes 'persons and cultures in essentialized time-space units' (p.8). As such, the liminal 'third space' becomes 'one stroke of magic', which 'undoes all that', 'dissolving the modern into permanent hybridity' (p.8). In language and intercultural studies, there seems to be a resonant tendency for writers, educators, and learners of language and culture to conceive of the 'third space' through presupposing – in a 'solidified' manner (cf. Dervin, 2016) – the existence of, and a relation between, a 'first' and a 'second'. Sometimes, this 'space' is discussed as a site of confusion where individuals feel 'caught/stuck in between'; alternatively – and perhaps more frequently – it is imagined to be a site of liberation, where interlocutors are freed from prior cultural roots, and openly negotiate and reconcile issues emanating from differences between neutrally juxtaposed cultures.

The meaning of Bhabha's 'third space' concept is perhaps subject to open-ended readings, which may be in part attributable to the 'complex and ambiguous jargon' and the 'literary style and rhetoric of much postcolonial texts' (Fahlander, 2007). Additionally, due to the highly individual and subjective nature of language, when individuals appropriate the words 'third space', these words may represent the 'inert hardened crust' (Voloshinov, 1929) of previous language activity, which at the same time obfuscate the underlying creation, theoretical interpretation, and ideological bias (these may differ considerably). In language and intercultural studies, what seems to often elude the 'third space' discourse is a discussion of these underpinnings in regard to what this 'space' is and what is meant by 'third'. Ideas from earlier deliberations on this concept in poststructuralist and postcolonial literature are not necessarily employed, such as criticisms of the normative and a-political ideology

inherent in liberal relativist perspectives on 'cultural diversity' (Rutherford, 1990). Here, we echo Fahlander's (2007) reminder (made to fellow researchers in archaeology) about 'this apparent neglection of postcolonial theory' and take up his call that we should be careful not to 'refute postcolonial theory as postmodern mumbo-jumbo' while incorporating its concepts into our research vocabulary (pp.19-20).

This special issue therefore aims to provide a forum where authors researching language and intercultural communication confront and contest the 'third space'. It is, in a way, a response to MacDonald and O'Regan's (2014) appeal made to our field for researching into the constitution of the 'locales' in which intercultural communication occurs. In the selected articles in this issue, the themes examined encompass 'foreign language' learning and use, 'intercultural competence', 'intercultural dialogue', 'intercultural identity formation', and the neoliberal shapers of related discourses. Locating these issues in 'third spaces' in one form or another, the authors explore the qualities of such 'spaces' through theoretical threads connected to thinkers across time and discipline, such as Claire Kramsch's (1993) idea of *sphere of interculturality*, Martin Buber's (1947) concept of *dialogue* (and *monologue-disguised-as-dialogue*), Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) notion of *chronotope*, and Michel Foucault's (1975) framework of *power/knowledge*.

Reconfiguring the boundaries in the 'third space'

Before we introduce the articles in detail, we present an extract from a recent exchange we (Vivien Xiaowei Zhou and Nick Pilcher) had with Adrian Holliday. This exchange emerged through our encounters at several academic events (including the IALIC 2017 conference), where we noted from his talks a shift in thinking concerning the 'third space'. We were thus keen to discuss with Adrian how this shift occurred (particularly recorded in Holliday, 2013 and Holliday, 2018 – the first and second editions of his book entitled *Understanding Intercultural Communication: Negotiating a grammar of culture*) and what a reconfiguration of 'third space' might mean for language and intercultural educators and researchers.

Nick: My interpretation of reading what I saw [with regard to the 'third space'] in your book was that in the first edition it was something that created boundaries, that it was moving on from a *one* and a *two* and a *three*, and that it wasn't very porous, whereas your thinking now is that it can be taken by essentialism to be like that, but at the same time [also] from a non-essential perspective, which is much more fluid and dynamic.

Adrian: Yes. The reason that I moved was largely because of Malcolm [MacDonald]'s plenary at the conference in Edinburgh, suggesting to me that this essentialist framing of the 'third space' came from a particular [perspective]. What everybody is now talking about is neoliberalism. Educational structures try to pin things down and this essentialist version of the 'third space' is a product of that.

[On a wider social scale] The opposite force [to the non-essentialist idea of third space] is polarised populist politics, isn't it? This is what people are saying, people like Trump. They tend to want to abolish anything which is common and you see this with Brexit as well. All you are getting is bickering – one side or the other. There seems to be no common ground. It's mostly rhetoric. What you'll get is one opinion pitched against another opinion.

Once you have got that idea, you go back and read Homi Bhabha, for example. If you look very hard at what he is saying, you find something quite different. So that's where the shift

has come from. Malcolm was saying to me, look, you know, there's more going on than what you thought … so suddenly there's a liberation.

There's a key text, which is *Lost in Translation* by Eva Hoffman. I feel I've always read that in a completely different way to what many other people have read it. It's largely to do with the perception of the relationship between language and culture. She tells a story of what it's like to be living in a different place, not being able to use the language that you are comfortable with and having to then negotiate all the time who you are. Now, people who read this – if they have a neo or soft essentialist view – will automatically frame it as her being stuck between two cultures. If you don't read it in that way you see an open negotiation going on. And that's the difference. I think that people who think that she is talking about being stuck are missing the point. It's to do with how you frame what's going on. I think that's really important. You can either see it in one way or another. I think that the third space idea as an essentialist idea has been very convenient.

The other thing that has happened, which I'm increasingly beginning to appreciate, is this mapping of intercultural onto language education. You are learning a new language and there's a sort of mastery because it's a new language. It's got vocabulary, grammar and content. If you think of culture in the same way, it drives you into this compartmentalisation. But culture isn't like this. It isn't vocabulary and content. It's all over the place, to do with its shifts and moves. It's a very different type of thing to language. So the in-between idea of a third space in language education might be quite useful. People talk about 'interlanguage': you go to a place where you can practise [it] and it's safe; there's a classroom and so you are in an 'intermediate' space; you're learning the repertoire before you go out somewhere else. But culture isn't like that. It's much more fluid and open.

Vivien: Now how do you see the relation between third space and your concept of small culture formation on-the-go? [In a recent academic meeting], you were raising this question to the audience: is the third space a contrived space or something happening all the time? What are your thoughts on that?

Adrian: Let's talk about patriarchy. Patriarchy is a set of structures that you find absolutely almost everywhere. It's a set of structures to do with power and hierarchy, and particular views about who is superior, who is inferior, what people can do, what they can't do, and so on. It causes all sorts of problems. I think we are all aware of it. It affects us all in different ways. None of us can completely escape from it. It really is a 'Centre' thing. I'm interested in the 'deCenteredness'. So it's very easy to talk about the 'deCentred' as being the non-West trying to express who it really is because the West is dominating everything, but here is me trying to look at myself differently in a deCentred way from this hierarchy of patriarchy. It's very hard, because I'm brought up with it. I'm part of it. It's deep inside me. So the third space is a place that I go to in order to interrogate that. So for a moment, I find myself in a position to be able to look.

My co-researcher Sara Amadasi and I were thinking that the third space is a moment – a place – in which we can stand back and see things in a different way. It's a space of investigation. For a moment we said 'well, actually, this is what researchers do', but that's not enough, because it's got to be for everybody. So if you do your research properly and follow all the research disciplines of trying to separate yourself from the beliefs, then you are trying to acquire a third space. But it's got to be something that everybody does, so there are moments in everybody's life when they find the deCentredness, and they can see what's

going on around them, perhaps even for seconds. And that's the third space. Something unexpected happens and it takes everybody somewhere else and enables them to understand. And what we began to see was a grand narrative we haven't seen before, which is to do with just getting on with your life and not minding other people, a grand narrative of getting on with life in a normal way without any pressures and there's no prejudice. We all have that inside us, but it's very hard to get to it sometimes. So it's a moment of intervention.

I'm moving away completely from this idea of small culture as a particular place, like a family or a sports group or a department. It's something which is fluid. So small culture formation on-the-go is where people pass by each other and engage or they don't engage. It is something that is going on all the time. So in a particular physical environment in which small culture formation on-the-go takes a particular form, does it open sufficiently to allow third spaces or not? I imagine there's a massive amount of micropolitics going on between people [in such environments].

Nick: What are your thoughts on creating a space where those inside it feel comfortable, free and able to negotiate multiple meanings, identities and conflicts in values and interests to help with creativity and development?

Adrian: I think that sounds OK, although probably it's not that safe. What springs to mind is the AA [Alcoholics Anonymous][1] meeting where everybody sits around. Is that a third space? I really don't know.

Vivien: If we look at a higher education setting, the classroom, such as some examples [we presented in a recent academic meeting] from our work about group work, students might resist it because they often feel uncomfortable [about the group dynamics]. And if they resist it, there might be a dilemma for educators that students would withdraw from this space of meaning negotiation. How do you see that?

Adrian: I thought that [with] some of that data that you present, what was important is how you were interpreting it. That's a sort of data that could be interpreted in a completely different way. What was going on there was a real negotiation of what these things mean between those people. You noticed it and brought it out. Someone else might have talked about it as this just being confusion and being stuck. So that means you were in the third space in order to be able to see what was going on. Whether or not they [the students] are, I don't know. I don't know how far then you go back to them [the students] with your interpretation, and you are with them and then reassess.

Vivien: So should we and how can we present such tense experiences to our students? We were wondering that as educators, should we be telling students this is what it might look like? But then there were students saying 'you are presenting all this negative data to us', and 'we don't feel comfortable and don't know how to get on with this dystopic idea'.

Adrian: I talked to a colleague about this idea of deCentred because I was unhappy with the 'de' - why it should sound so negative. He said you can't get around the fact that these prejudicial structures are there. You have to address prejudice. That's why in the way I've written 'deCentred', I put a capital C in there. It's actually the Centre with the big C, which is

[1] Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

patriarchy, the West or whatever, but it is a clear location of power, which is uncomfortable. I don't think you can do this in an easy way, because we are all locked into that in one way or another. So I don't think we would be honest with our students if we gave them the impression that this intercultural stuff is comfortable, you know, it's just nice people liking each other. There's nothing comfortable about it. It's to do with addressing power structures.

Nick: So how do you create 'principles' for dialogue? Is dialogue seen as going to a destination? For example, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, where you start off by being very ethnocentric and then suddenly 'Oh, hang on a minute! I'm being very ethnocentric'. And then you become essentialist and become more aware of that - this idea that you are progressing along this path towards a goal of being 'interculturally sensitive'.

Adrian: Let's not forget that exactly what you've said would exist within a neo-essentialist frame. What sometimes goes wrong is that the need for sensitivity is understood, but it never crosses the boundaries. It's still 'that' culture and 'this' culture, trying to understand 'each other', and then you get back into the essentialist frame of the third space. If you are prepared to go beyond the idea of 'this' and 'that' and dissolve the boundaries, then you are in the non-essentialist version of third space. I think this is what's problematic. There's so much seductive research going around, which is saying all these wonderful sharing-caring things, but the boundaries are still there.

Overview of articles

The above extract from our discussion with Adrian Holliday (as well as the parts we are unable to present here due to space limits) exemplifies some common challenges that interculturalists encounter when seeking insights from the 'third space'. These challenges concern perspectives on the relationship between language and culture, between power and education, and between material and virtual spaces of communication, which are explored at some depth by the authors in this special issue.

The first two research articles focus on the educational space, interrogating the possibilities of intercultural learning vis-à-vis power issues. Jim McKinley, Katie Dunworth, Trevor Grimshaw and Janina Iwaniec report on an interview study of the experiences and perceptions of the development of intercultural competence in a UK university. Based on the views gathered from both academic staff and international postgraduate students, the authors call for revisions in educational policy and practice to facilitate the creation of 'comfortable third spaces'. While recognising an apparent 'incoherence' between the dynamic nature of intercultural interactions and the idea of a relaxed, 'comfortable' space, McKinley et al. contend that the ability to negotiate and learn from conflicting values and interests, 'a necessary catalyst to creativity and development', occurs more effectively where there is a safe space in which participants feel protected and respected to address alternative and conflicting views (Whitechurch, 2008).

This is followed by Vivien Xiaowei Zhou and Nick Pilcher's article on 'intercultural dialogue', which assumes a comparatively pessimistic perspective. Our contention centres on power struggle, which we believe is an inescapable and often uncomfortable facet of individuals' intercultural communication experiences even in the microcosm of a (institutionalised) learning context. Through an analysis of postgraduate students' reflective essays on their experiences of 'culturally diverse' group work, we suggest that the

opening/closure of intercultural dialogue is intricately linked with the extent to which interlocutors 'descend' into the instability of the 'third space'. We propose that intercultural dialogue (and intercultural communication) be (re)conceptualised as a political and ethical response to the thirdness in the in-between space of communication, which should be removed from a normalising discourse that emphasises 'self'-expression, 'cultural diversity', and notions of teleologically-achievable 'intercultural competence'.

Relating these two articles to Adrian Holliday's point about 'safeness' and deCentering, we wonder: if a degree of 'safeness' is perceived necessary for nurturing an educational 'third space', can we help students manage, or indeed shift, feelings of '(dis)comfort' through the ways we delineate the boundaries of this 'third space', whereby we can help students deCentre, for example, from the 'givens' regarding intercultural dialogic principles?

In the next article, Cristina Ros i Solé examines the 'third and unhomely spaces' where language learners subvert 'natural orders' and artificial homes through creating 'a passage-way between the mundane and the transcendental in the intercultural experience'. Drawing on the literary concept of 'Chronotope' (or time-space) and the sociolinguistic concept of 'Muda' (a Catalan term for indicating a time of change), Ros i Solé presents a framework for interpreting language learners' critical moments of recognition in the ordinary aspects of their intercultural encounters. What transpires to us is how etched in memory and crucial such moments are for these individuals, which raises questions regarding whether they can, or indeed should be, pinned down to 'transferable' experiences. Resonant with Adrian Holliday's comments on deCentering, many of the moments described in Ros i Solé's study epitomise transformative flashes of inspiration, which provide a window on the self and afford new body memories.

The following research article, by Catherine Peck and Lynda Yates, extends the exploration at the intersection between language and culture through a focus on South Korean speakers' learning and use of English as a foreign language (EFL) in intercultural experiences. Bringing emotions – an often overlooked dimension of 'intercultural competence' – to the fore, Peck and Yates examine how neoliberalism shapes the discourse of 'EFL competence' as largely an individual project of self-development devoid of feelings, while obscuring individuals' unequal access to learning opportunities. Their findings highlight the tensions in the intercultural 'third space' in terms of the dichotomous feelings EFL learners and users often face: liberation through their use of a foreign language and simultaneously a sense of limitation due to struggles with the language itself.

If the first four articles are situated within our familiar sites of research, the next two take us to somewhat 'unusual' spaces of interculturality. Haynes Collins and Chris Pajak report on an ethnographic study of a publicly-accessible swimming pool and examine how cultural practices coalesce around the 'third space' in this micro-setting. Departing from an analysis of the structural aspects of this material space (e.g. the lanes and boundaries) and users' emotional responses to their interaction (e.g. 'lane rage'), Collins and Pajak consider how the micropolitics here may connect with larger social issues concerning othering and intercultural communication strategies. Under the façade of 'order' in the pool, where individuals are 'thrown together' and seemingly treated the 'same' (by the water), the authors draw our attention to the undercurrents of tension, marginalisation, and hegemonic practices arising not only from conflicting swimming approaches, but also from power asymmetries.

The last case of the 'third space' explored in this special issue takes a virtual form. Yueh-ching Chang and Yu-jung Chang consider how transnational language learners may create a discursive 'third space' via the new media to negotiate alternative discourse identities. The study is based on a video analysis of YouTube material created by expatriates in Taiwan who speak/learn Chinese as an additional language. The authors explore how these expatriates exert their individual agency through performative acts in this virtual 'third space' to articulate de-territorial, in-between, and hybrid identities and resist traditional stereotypes often ascribed to them as 'foreigners' and language 'learners'.

The range of perspectives on the intercultural 'third space' shown in these articles both reflect and constitute part of the 'thirdness' discourse in contemporary language and intercultural studies. This discourse is put under critical scrutiny in an article by Malcolm MacDonald. It is unconventional that an executive editor publishes in the journal which s/he edits. However, since Malcolm MacDonald was invited to give a plenary talk at the conference, exceptionally the LAIC Editorial Board has agreed that we can conclude this special issue with his contribution. Through a corpus analysis of the discourse of 'thirdness' (e.g. 'third space', 'third place, and 'third culture') in intercultural studies over the past four decades or so, MacDonald analyses the meanings variously attached to 'thirdness' as well as the ideologies 'at play'. He calls for a reinvigoration of the 'transgressive and transformative spirit' of the 'third space' as found in Bhabha's original texts, for it is vital for (re-)positioning our shared project of (critical) intercultural communication against 'this time of an intercontinental resurgence of nationalism which has led to new policies of "integration" within the nation state'.

Concluding remarks

While MacDonald's article brings the discussion of 'third space' in this special issue to a completion, we hope this, as well as the preceding articles, sets the stage for further exploration of this concept in our field. Especially in an age continuously troubled by 'new' forms of binary opposition and concomitant practices of antagonism and prejudice, it is of much relevance for interculturalists to (re-)engage with the theorising of 'thirdness' and (re-)discover what may have escaped our attention during its migration to our field. As Homi Bhabha puts it, it is a responsibility of 'committed intellectuals' to remain alert to the limits of 'reactionary reflex' (i.e. reading a new situation within pre-given models) and participate more fully, productively, and creatively in our political intervention through pushing ourselves to rethink and extend our theoretical principles (Rutherford, 1990).

As we begin this new volume, we welcome Shruthi Shankar as our new Production Editor, and Arthur John Buniel as our new Editorial Assistant. We look forward to a fruitful working relationship with the new team over the forthcoming year, and beyond.

Notes on contributors

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou is Lecturer in Intercultural Communication in the Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, where she is Deputy Programme Leader for MSc Intercultural Business Communication (and with TESOL). Her research interests include Intercultural Communication and Education, Narrative Inquiry and Researching Multilingually.

Nick Pilcher is Lecturer and Programme Leader for the MSc in Intercultural Business Communication (and with TESOL) and teaches writing in academic subjects. He researches around language, education and qualitative methods. He has contributed to work published in journals such as The Qualitative Report, Power and Education, Maritime Policy and Management, and The European Journal of Engineering Education.

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