

# Aspects of *Interculturality* and *Transculturality*: Four Key Expressions from German-language Scholarship and their Possible Implications for Foreign Language Teaching in Japan

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In an influential article, Kramsch (2006) argued that communicative competence was an insufficient concept as the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching and learning and should be replaced by the more expansive concept of *symbolic competence* which includes cultural in addition to purely linguistic knowledge. Communicative competence appeared to be mainly focused on the exchange of information, whereas a symbolic and intercultural competence would empower learners by challenging accepted meanings and creating new ones. It is perhaps not coincidental that Kramsch, before her retirement, taught German rather than English. Claus Altmayer, also a professor of German as a Foreign and Second Language, has written of the threat of ‘banalization’ linked with the communicative turn in language teaching, which can be counteracted by a wider approach incorporating cultural concerns (2016). In the Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Communication (Rings & Rasinger, 2020), three of the introductory four chapters were penned by academics based at German universities. The German-language literature on the subject of language teaching and culture is therefore likely to contain interesting insights for those unable to read German. This is, in fact, a point that has previously been made in a stimulating book chapter written by Britta Viebrock of the University of Frankfurt (2019). Viebrock presents a skeptical account of the writings of her mainly German colleagues on intercultural learning, focusing on Welsch’s term *transcultural*, but also briefly describing the traditional concept of *Landeskunde* (“regional and country knowledge”) and mentioning Plikat’s radical advocacy of *Diskursbewusstheit* (“discourse awareness”).

The present essay is an attempt to supplement Viebrock’s outline. The supplementation lies in three aspects. First, the article will briefly consider terms not included in the chapter, namely *narratives Verstehen* (“narrative understanding”) as proposed by Lothar Bredella (2012) and *fictions of migration*, the title of a book by Roy Sommer (2001) of the University of Wuppertal. Second, I will seek to reproduce ample quotations from original German-language publications accompanied by my own translations into English. In this sense, the article aims to be a work of translational scholarship, mediating between the world of German-language academia and a much larger potential English-language readership. Third, since the journal of publication is based in Japan, an attempt will be made to reflect on what relevance the German-language literature might have for foreign language teaching in Japan.

## INTERCULTURALITY

### Regional And Cultural Studies (“Landeskunde”)

The notion of *interculturality* in foreign language teaching draws a clear boundary between a home

culture (the culture of the learners) and a target culture (the culture in which the foreign language is embedded). A traditional aspect of interculturality is what is known in German-speaking countries as *Landeskunde* (“regional and cultural studies”). In a critique of the traditional concept, Altmayer et al. (2023, p. 7) associate *Landeskunde* with:

*Daten und Fakten über den deutschsprachigen Raum, von denen wir glauben, dass Deutschlernende sie kennen sollten, also Zahlen, Namen und Ereignisse insbesondere aus Geschichte und Geographie, aus der Wirtschaft, dem gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Leben* (“data and facts about the German-speaking area which we believe German learners ought to know, so figures, names and events, in particular from history and geography, from the economy and from social and cultural life”).

We can take as an example of this approach an English reader written by Rainer Jacob (2014) for German learners preparing for the *Abitur* (academic school leaving examination). Its title is *Landeskunde Großbritannien* (“Regional and Cultural Studies: Great Britain”), with the overall heading of *Abitur-Wissen Englisch* (“Knowledge for the Abitur: English”). Among the chapter titles are *Britain’s Political System*, *Britain’s Social Structure*, *Schools and Universities*, and *Religion*. Interestingly, Rainer’s reader contains a section on Northern Ireland, although, linguistically speaking, Northern Ireland is not included in the definition of Great Britain. Naturally, as a separate state, there is no section on the Republic of Ireland. This highlights one of the issues with the concept of *Landeskunde* in that languages may be the native language in a number of different countries. So the question arises: Which country or countries should be given priority in the study of background knowledge? But with this issue too, the German-speaking countries can offer some insight. A relatively recent trend in teaching German as a Foreign Language is to include Austria, Switzerland (and sometimes Liechtenstein) as well as Germany in *Landeskunde* materials. In a clever wordplay, this is known as the *DACH* concept, using the word for “roof” in the sense of “overarching” structure as well as incorporating the international vehicle codes (D for Germany, A for Austria, and CH for Switzerland). Materials may be presented as an *Entdeckungsreise* (“journey of discovery”) with pictures and text about, for example, Castle Vaduz in Liechtenstein, or Sachertorte in Vienna, and accompanying basic comprehension questions (Sander 2013).

An interesting challenge for German native speakers teaching *Landeskunde* overseas has been the presentation of the Nazi period in German history. It has been reported that in some non-Western countries, for example Mongolia (Heimrath, 2013), Adolf Hitler may not always be viewed negatively as a genocidal tyrant. Against this background, Fornoff (2016) has, following the work on cultural memory by the French historian Pierre Nora, compiled various literary and media representations of Nazi death camps and the person of Adolf Hitler to teach *Landeskunde* at tertiary level using *Erinnerungsorte* (“places of memory”) of Nazism. Fornoff’s project can be described as *critical* in that it adopts an approach to history that is influenced by political values – that fascist ideology was a negative reality in recent German history and needs to be reflected upon. This critical approach reflects the influence of the ideas of Claus Altmayer, who has championed the notion of discursive *Landeskunde*, which will be introduced later in this article under the sections dealing with transculturality.

### **Narrative Understanding (“Narratives Verstehen”)**

Although advocates of *Landeskunde* have attempted to adapt it to communicative and skills-based approaches to language teaching, its focus has mostly been on fact-based knowledge. However, Byram (2021), the dean of the intercultural turn in the 1990s, stresses that knowledge alone is insufficient as a basis for intercultural competence: Attitudes towards other cultures are also of key importance. It is here that the work of Lothar Bredella becomes of interest. Bredella’s contention is that by reading stories in foreign languages learners will develop desirable intercultural attitudes characterized by empathy, judgement and cooperation. The approach is explicitly intercultural, with clear distinctions and boundaries between individual cultures. He situates narrative understanding within a wider pedagogical framework of a *Didaktik des Fremdverstehens* (“Didactics of Understanding the Foreign”). Encountering foreign cultures in fictional narratives may lead to a change in perspective in the reader and a relativization of dogmas and certainties that are prevalent in one’s own culture. The fictional dimension of the intercultural encounter is important in promoting intercultural openness because it is, in a sense, safer than a real-life encounter (Bredella, 2012a, p. 41):

*Leser können sich auf das Dargestellte in kognitiver und emotionaler Hinsicht intensiv einlassen, weil sie vom Handlungsdruck in der Lebenswelt entlastet sind. Die Rezeption von Geschichten ermöglicht es, sich gefahrlos auf neue Welten einzulassen und in ihnen probeweise zu handeln* (“Readers can open themselves intensively to what is represented in cognitive and emotional respects, because they are relieved of the pressure of action in the real world. The reception of stories makes it possible to admit themselves harmlessly to new worlds and to act on a trial basis in them”).

The basis upon which he makes such claims is scholarly rather than empirical, founded on his own extensive reading of secondary sources. Thus, with regard to the development of empathy, he cites the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum (cited in Bredella, 2012a, p. 71):

*Literary texts cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but sharing many problems and possibilities with us.*

Similarly, with regard to developing capacities for judgement and cooperation, he draws on a range of writers from different disciplines, for example the linguist Harald Weinrich, the psychologist and literary critic D. W. Harding, and the philosopher Peter Janich. Fundamentally, Bredella’s writings are based on an analogy between *Fremdverstehen* and the process of reading in general. Both are open and dialogic rather than monologic processes:

*Der Leser kann nur vor dem Hintergrund seines Vorverständnisses verstehen, aber sein Vorverständnis soll durch die Lektüre verändert werden. Dabei bleibt offen, ob diese Veränderung erfolgt ...* (“The reader can only understand against the background of their pre-understanding, but their pre-understanding should be altered by their reading. In this it remains open whether this alteration does take place ...”). (Bredella, 2012b, p. 25).

The task of the educative process is therefore to facilitate changes in perspective through raising questions during the reading process. These may be questions about the characters (their values and their motives, and their emotions), questions about the conflicts in the story, and questions about the relationship of the world of the story to the world of the reader.

As stated above, Bredella's work is rich in scholarship, but does not deal with the processes and outcomes of actual classroom practice, so it remains uncertain to what extent the ideals of narrative understanding are being or can be achieved in real classrooms.

## TRANSCULTURALITY

Notions of *interculturality* tend to presuppose that individual cultures can be more or less defined as separate from each other, that speakers belong to one culture, and that cultural relationships are therefore relationships *between* completely separate speakers and completely separate cultures. Such notions have been challenged in the writing of the German philosopher, Wolfgang Welsch. Welsch's contention is that the link that has traditionally been drawn between culture and nation, if it ever had any validity, is not appropriate in the age of globalization with its massive digital networks and its human migrations. The prefix *trans* is to be understood in its double Latin sense of going "beyond" and "through":

*Unser kulturtheoretisches Leitbild sollte daher nicht mehr das von Kugeln, sondern das von Geflechten oder Netzen sein* ("Our guiding culture-theoretical image should therefore be no longer that of spheres, but of entanglements and nets") (Welsch, 2017, p. 12).

Modern humanity is imbued with transculturality both at the macro level of society and at the micro level of individual identity. As a result, for German scholars such as Blell and Doff, teachers need to move beyond binary oppositions in the global EFL classroom. According to the witty pre-title to their article, "it takes more than two for this tango." This does not mean that experience of interculturality is to be completely discarded, but it does entail that teachers and learners will have more of a focus on researching (rather than transmitting) cultures, how they are constructed, and how they are interrelated. Blell and Doff (2014) list six propositions for initiating change, of which I will focus on two that have been the subject of book-length treatment by other German writers.

### Fictions of Migration

The last of Blell and Doff's six propositions is that "transcultural learning demands the development of 'border literacies'" (2014, p. 83). The notion of transculturality therefore provides impulses towards the types of fictional narrative selected for use in EFL classrooms. A particular focus of transculturality are works written in English by authors from or with connections to former colonies in Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean, and associated with qualities of cultural mixing or hybridity. An interesting example of such transcultural literature study in EFL learning is reported in the work of Annika Kreft at the University of Frankfurt (2020). Unlike Bredella's theoretical account of intercultural understanding, Kreft provides a detailed account of classroom practice including transcription of teacher–student and student–student interactions, using triangulated documentary research methods. The four literary works used in her study are

Gloria Miklowitz's 1985 novel about anti-Asian prejudice in California, *The War Between the Classes*; Gene Luen Yang's 2006 graphic novel *American Born Chinese*; Mohsin Hamid's 2013 novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; and Ayub Khan-Din's 1996 play, *East is East*. As an overarching category to subsume these works, she adopts German scholar Roy Sommer's term *fictions of migration*. According to Sommer (2001, p. 7), the term serves as an open and non-essentialist term for intercultural narrative literature as a whole ("ein anti-essentialistischer, offener und anschlußfähiger Oberbegriff für interkulturelle Erzählliteratur insgesamt"). The participants in Kreft's study were teachers and students in an academic secondary school ("Gymnasium") in Hessen, Germany. The focus of interest was threefold: What happened when fictions of migration were used in English instruction? What opportunities were students given to negotiate the meaning of and reflect on the texts? And how did the students accept and construe such meanings and reflections? Kreft's analysis in answer to these questions yielded somewhat disappointing results in terms of the desired *transcultural competence*. She found that classroom interactions still overwhelmingly construed cultures as binary and nation based. It was mostly students who themselves came from a background of migration that expressed transcultural insights. Teachers in many cases neither recognized nor fully exploited the potential for transcultural competence in the literary works, and they tended to use the texts mainly as a means to the development of linguistic skills, with the cultural content playing only a secondary role. It can be mentioned in regard to these findings that they would not have surprised Bredella, who strongly defended the notion of interculturality and vehemently criticized the recent insistence on transculturality: One may consider notions of interculturality as outdated and even erroneous, yet throughout the world the thinking of millions of people is still characterized by categorizations of distinct cultures. According to Bredella (2012a, p. 90):

*Transkulturalität ist problematisch, weil sie ein bestimmtes Menschenbild, radikale Hybridität, allen vorschreibt, kulturelle Bindungen als ein Übel betrachtet und damit verhindert, dass wir Andere in ihrer kulturellen Andersheit zu verstehen suchen* ("Transculturality is problematic because it prescribes for everyone a predetermined image of humanity – radical hybridity – and considers cultural ties as bad, thus hindering us from seeking to understand others in their cultural otherness").

### **Discourse Awareness ("Diskursbewusstheit")**

The fourth of Blell and Doff's propositions is that "transcultural learning includes discourses of power" (2014, p. 83). Jochen Plikat advocates discourse awareness ("Diskursbewusstheit") as the central goal of foreign language teaching, rather than cultural competence. Although recent thinking about transculturality is welcomed by Plikat for its reevaluation of outmoded notions of culture, there remains the risk of an excessive relativism that does not engage with structures of power and is not critical of ways of thinking and behaving that run counter to peaceful coexistence in a democratic and pluralistic society. Plikat (2017, p. 280), drawing on the critical discourse analysis of Norman Fairclough, posits a need to go beyond notions of national cultures and languages to supra-individual structures of language use and meaning generation. Cultural studies should make visible concealed mechanisms of the power that is used to generate and sustain social injustice, hopefully thereby raising the awareness of learners and assisting them when they encounter the power imbalances of transcultural encounters. He leaves to the future a detailed picture of how foreign language classrooms might change if the ultimate goal is discourse awareness, but he does mention towards

the end of his monograph the kinds of principles that such an approach would seek to embody. These would include an explicit embrace of political controversies, topicality, social constructivism, plurality of thinking, and multimodality.

Claus Altmayer has also put forward the notion of discourse skill (“Diskursfähigkeit”) as the overarching goal of foreign language teaching. The traditional focus on facts about target cultures should be replaced by *diskursive Landeskunde*, in other words an engagement with the discourses we use to create cultures. Altmayer and his collaborators (2016) have published German materials which are illustrative of the form classes in discursive *Landeskunde* might take. The materials are concerned with contemporary political issues, not only issues of migration and national identity, but also progressive approaches to feminism and climate change. Students are required to interact in pairs and groups to reflect on images and texts and give their own opinions, but the materials clearly guide in the direction of progressive rather than conservative stances. Thus, in the module on eating, rather than texts about various regional culinary specialties in Germany, students are presented with informative texts about issues such as factory farming and how eating beef contributes to climate change.

However, there is an issue with the extent to which such discursive *Landeskunde* is practical for those teachers and students who may be resistant to a progressive agenda. A further criticism of Altmayer’s approach made by Fornoff and Koreik (2020) is that it is linguistically utopian in its requirement for learners of German as a Foreign Language to actively use the L2 in the discursive process of negotiating cultural meanings, since the overwhelming majority of such learners are studying relatively basic German at secondary-school level.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPAN

### The Conservativeness of Interculturality in Japan

In this article, I have selected four key expressions from the German language literature on foreign language teaching and cultural concerns. Two (“regional and cultural studies” and “narrative understanding”) originate in notions of interculturality and two (“fictions of migration” and “discourse awareness”) from notions of transculturality. One reason for focusing on German language literature is that it shares with Japan a strong foreign language tradition as opposed to the second language orientation of Western TESOL. The continuing connection of nation state, language, and culture in German-speaking European countries is likely to support the ongoing centrality of intercultural concerns over important, but also more marginal, transcultural perspectives. This has both similarities and differences with the situation in Japan. Although foreign language teaching is also focused on interculturality, it has generally been described as a politically and culturally much more conservative form of interculturality, with little impact from transcultural impulses. A key word in popular notions of interculturality in Japan is *nihonjinron*, which can be literally translated as “theory of Japaneseness.” In discussions of foreign language teaching, it tends to have a negative evaluative meaning, referring to an essentialist and nationalistic way of viewing Japanese culture as unique and homogeneous. It can be described as essentialist because it supposes that by being born and brought up in Japan, all Japanese people share a common “heart and soul” (Yamakuse, 2011), and it usually seeks to nurture a strong sense of pride in Japanese culture (Fujiwara, 2005). Most non-Japanese commentators view *nihonjinron* as an impediment to the promotion of intercultural understanding through English teaching in

Japan. Liddicoat (2007, p. 37) tartly remarks that English is seen merely “as a tool which adds to the communicative repertoire of the Japanese, but no implied effect on their Japaneseness.” Bouchard (2017, p. 270) highlights the cultural reductiveness of example sentences from Japanese English textbooks such as, “People in America love Japanese food because it is healthy.” Toh (2016, p. 83), commenting on the use of English at university level, criticizes the “prevailing conservative arrangements that uphold Japaneseness ... [enabling] Japanese students to ‘learn’ in English, but still remain blissfully ignorant of pressing issues in education, power, society and life in the real world.”

### Future Directions

The German key expressions explicated in this essay present a stark contrast to such a nationalistic Japanese approach to interculturality, so the question arises what relevance (if any) each of them has to foreign language teaching in Japan. It seems to me that *Landeskunde* of English-speaking countries is unlikely to form a significant part of secondary-level English curricula in Japan, especially if notions of English as a Lingua Franca gain more traction, yet concerns of globalized transculturality should have some influence on university courses for English majors. Clearly, account needs to be taken of the contemporary multi-ethnic and multi-cultural realities of North American, British and Antipodean cultures. In particular, it is important that future Japanese textbook writers and teachers of English should not be purveyors of outdated cultural stereotypes. At secondary school level, there is some logic to the idea that English materials should deal with Japanese society and culture rather than British and American. As the tourist industry flourishes, it is indeed more likely that students will encounter foreigners in Japan than in foreign countries. However, if at the same time Japan itself opens up to more immigration, it will surely become appropriate to deal with contemporary diversity alongside ancient traditions of food, dress, religion, etc. Roger Fornoff’s (2016) approach using “places of memory” might offer some hints about how recent history could be addressed in a more critical way. The notion of narrative understanding (“narratives Verstehen”) might give pause to highlight the relative underweight given to fictional materials in Japanese TEFL. The relative absence, for example, of fictional writing in university entrance English examinations is particularly striking. This is far from ideal even from a purely linguistic point of view, given that fiction is one of the four registers used in contemporary corpus-based grammars such as Biber et al. (1999). If heed were to be paid to German writers such as Bredella and to concerns of interculturality, future curriculum planning would attach a greater weight to the use of fictional stories in high school and university English education. This could be achieved through the greater use of simplified annotated readers, with choice of texts not being restricted to the traditional canon but also including contemporary *fictions of migration*. Parallel-text bilingual readers, as recommended by Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009), could be more widely deployed for intercultural learning. Pedagogical techniques mentioned by the same authors are simple reading to the class by the teacher, periods of silent reading by students with the use of reading corners, and, at advanced levels, re-translation. In my own movie-based teaching (Howell, 2015), the notion of *fictions of migration* might encourage the use of a film such as *Bend it like Beckham* with its accompanying novelization, which has also been translated into Japanese. This is a critically and commercially successful film which thematizes issues of migration and culture in England. As for discourse awareness (“Diskursbewusstheit”), this concept might prove fruitful in the teaching of cross-cultural pragmatics in Japan as it indicates a need for such theory to incorporate the



power dynamics in cross-cultural interactions and to consider possible benefits as well as the obvious disadvantages of non-convergent strategies in certain situations. For example, discourse awareness would help explore how cross-cultural pragmatics is not simply a matter of conforming to the sociolinguistic norms of native speakers.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay, the author has outlined four expressions from German-language scholarship and debate about culture and foreign language teaching. The expressions may not be well known in Japan either by Japanese or by non-Japanese language teachers, and the essay has been written in the hope that knowledge of them may be of professional interest and stimulative of reflection. However, whether they have any direct application to the Japanese situation must be a matter of debate among local practitioners. Notions of transculturality are associated with social facts and progressive ideologies surrounding a phenomenon of mass immigration in Europe that has not happened in Japan. And thus, it is not surprising that many writings in the country reveal a conservative and nation-oriented intercultural approach which is strikingly at odds with the contemporary academic literature in the German-speaking world. However, acquaintance with ideas of transculturality may soften the harder edges of nationalism, something which may be useful if, as seems likely, immigration into Japan increases for economic and social reasons.

Finally, by way of a coda to this article and a possible avenue for further scholarship, research and reflection, the author would suggest that the German-language insights could be harnessed into a critical and non-essentialist approach to foreign language learning and interculturality which is nevertheless conservative in its concern with the individual rather than the social. To do this, recourse can be made to the traditional educational concept of self-formation (“Bildung”). Foreign-language learning, although it secondarily may meet the utilitarian, economic needs of a given society, primarily fulfils the needs of “the self-actualizing individual” and “inner attitudes” that may lead to a “personally successful life” (Horlacher, p. 63, 15). Japanese learners can perhaps be reassured by intercultural approaches such as Bredella’s. Acquiring a foreign language does not necessitate the renunciation of a strong sense of Japanese identity. In the translated words of the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer:

If, by entering foreign language-worlds, we overcome the prejudices and limitations of our previous experience of the world, this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world. Like travellers we return home with new experiences (quoted in Young, 2018, p. 180).

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## ABSTRACT

### **Aspects of *Interculturality* and *Transculturality*: Four Key Expressions from German-language Scholarship and their Possible Implications for Foreign Language Teaching in Japan**

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Much recent research into intercultural communication has been conducted by German-speaking scholars and written in German. Yet, since German is not a widely spoken language in Japan, foreign language teachers in the country – both Japanese and non-Japanese – are probably not familiar with such writings. This article therefore summarizes recent German-language writings about aspects of *interculturality* and *transculturality* with the aim of introducing ideas to foreign language teachers in Japan which may be unfamiliar to them. The article draws on an essay by Britta Viebrock, developing its themes by discussing two new expressions and speculating on pedagogical implications for Japan. Four expressions are introduced: *regional and cultural studies*, *narrative understanding*, *fictions of migration*, and *discourse awareness*. These concepts are explicated using extensive quotations from the original German texts translated into English by the author. The author concludes the article by speculating on some possible implications for foreign language teaching in Japan. Drawing attention to the traditionally conservative approach to interculturality in Japan, the author suggests that, while the concepts of transculturality may have little traction at the present time, they may help mitigate nationalist excesses and offer beneficial insights as Japan changes over time. It is also suggested that a greater use of narrative fiction may be beneficial for intercultural teaching.

## 要 旨

### 「間文化性」と「異文化性」の様相 — ドイツ語の学術書から得られた4つの鍵となる概念と それらが日本の外国語教育に与える示唆 —

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近年の異文化間コミュニケーションに関する研究の多くは、ドイツ語を母語とする学者により、ドイツ語で執筆されている。しかし、日本におけるドイツ語使用人口はあまり多くなく、日本国内で外国語教育に携わる教員（日本籍・外国籍を問わない）はおそらくそうしたドイツ語で書かれた研究について馴染みがないと考えられる。そこで本稿は、日本の外国語教師にとって馴染みが薄いと思われる概念を紹介することを目的とし、ドイツ語で書かれた間文化性（interculturality）と異文化性（transculturality）に関する近年の文献を要約する。特に、Britta Viebrock 氏の著作を参照し、上記の2つの新しい用語について論じつつ、発展的に日本における教育学的示唆についても考察する。また、地域・文化研究（regional and cultural studies）、談話理解（narrative understanding）、移民小説（fictions of migration）、談話構造の意識化（discourse awareness）という4つの概念の紹介も行う。その際、著者が英訳した上述のドイツ語文献を幅広く引用しながら、詳細に解説する。最後に、これら4つの概念が日本の外国語教育に与える示唆について考察し、本稿を締めくくる。

本論文は、間文化性に対する日本の伝統的・保守的なアプローチに注目する。現時点で異文化性の概念はほとんど着目されていないように思われるが、この概念が時代の流れとともに日本が民族主義の行き過ぎを緩和していく上で、有益な視点を示すであろうことを指摘する。さらに、物語形式のフィクションをより多く活用することが、異文化間教育に有益である可能性を提示する。