

An inventory of intercultural miscommunication

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When interacting across cultures, it is obviously helpful for participants to have some knowledge of the interactive norms and values of their fellow-participants' cultural background. However, there are several reasons why such knowledge can never be enough to avoid problems of (partial) misunderstanding or non-understanding. This paper, after explaining these reasons, therefore advocates that what practising intercultural communicators need is knowledge of what sorts of thing can go wrong in interaction. With this practical usability in mind, it proposes a typology of intercultural miscommunication in the form of a checklist. The list is ordered; it moves from the most transparent (i.e. identifiable and therefore redeemable) type of cause of miscommunication to the most opaque type of cause (and therefore most difficult to overcome). The former comprise causes involving (purely) linguistic code; the latter involve sociocultural values which in themselves have nothing to do with communication. Between these lie causes involving various types communicative norms and values. The assumption behind the checklist presented here is that, while conflict is sometimes unavoidable (indeed, necessary), its resolution can be assisted by learning how to avoid its unnecessary and unintended exacerbation.