



**Intercultural  
Communication  
In Language Education  
2<sup>nd</sup> Conference  
Proceedings**

The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT)  
Intercultural Communication in Language Communication (ICLE)  
Special Interest Group (SIG)  
2<sup>nd</sup> Conference Peer-Reviewed Proceedings  
Tokyo, December 2023  
Javier Salazar & Gaby Benthien (Editors)  
ISSN: 2436-9896

**ICLE SIG Officers:**

Coordinator: Prateek Sharma  
Treasurer: Emily Marzin  
Program Chair: Roxana Sandu  
Membership Chair: Maria Gabriela Schmidt  
Publications Chair: Javier Salazar  
Publications Co-Chair: Gaby Benthien  
Webmaster: Andrew Johnson

**Review Board:**

Gareth Humphreys  
*Sojo University*

Valerie Hansford  
*Soka University*

Fern Sakamoto  
*Nagoya University of Foreign Studies*

Jeffrey McEntire  
*Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages*

Fumiko Kurihara  
*Chuo University*

Bruno Jactat  
*Tsukuba University*

All articles in these proceedings underwent a single blind peer review process.

All articles are open access and licensed under an Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license.

## Talk to the Elephant: How Shall We Address Prejudice?

Stephen M. Ryan

*Sanyo Gakuen University*

*Stephen05summer@yahoo.com*

### Abstract

Traditional approaches to prejudice in intercultural education and training treat it as a glitch in the system against which emergent interculturalists are warned. The insufficiency of this approach is clear from the ongoing struggles that all interculturalists face in dealing with their own and others' prejudice. This paper suggests, instead, that prejudice is most helpfully seen as an integral part of human cognition. The paper draws on Kahneman's metaphor of two minds in one brain, one fast-reacting, the other slower and more reflective, and on Haidt's extension of that metaphor, which posits a lawyer riding on an elephant: the lawyer (slow-thinking mind) is skilled at explaining the elephant's actions but has no control over them; the elephant (fast-thinking mind) controls how we react to the world. Traditional approaches focus on reasoning with the lawyer. The author suggests that we talk to the elephant and outlines ways of doing so.

### 要旨

異文化間の教育と訓練における偏見に対する伝統的なアプローチは、それをシステムの不具合として扱い、新興の異文化主義者が警告されます。このアプローチの不十分さは、すべての異文化間主義者が自分自身や他人の偏見に対処する際に直面している進行中の闘争から明らかです。代わりに、この論文は、偏見が人間の認知の不可欠な部分として最も役立つと見なされることを示唆しています。この論文は、1つの脳に2つの心があるという Kahneman の比喩を利用しています。一方は反応が速く、もう一方は反応が遅く、内省的です。Haidt はその比喩を拡張し、弁護士が象に乗っていると仮定しています。象の行動を説明するのは上手ですが、それをコントロールすることはできません。ゾウ（頭の回転が速い心）は、私たちが世界にどう反応するかを制御します。伝統的なアプローチは、弁護士との推論に焦点を当てています。著者は、ゾウと話すことを提案し、その方法を概説しています。

#### Please cite this article as follows:

Ryan, Stephen M. (2023). Talk to the Elephant: How Shall We Address Prejudice? In: J. Salazar & G. Benthien (Eds.), *ICLE SIG 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference Peer-Reviewed Proceedings*. (pp. 29-39) Retrieved from: <https://jalticle.org/course/view.php?id=3>

Bias, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination constitute a nexus of ideas and behaviours against which we repeatedly warn our students and trainees: these are the evils that we should all avoid. The four terms are subtly interlinked and intertwined with fine, but sometimes shifting, distinctions drawn between them. Rather than try to untangle them from each other here, I will address them as a single nexus for which any of the four words can be used as a shorthand, but I refer the reader to Fiske (2023) and Shaules (2021) for a more nuanced analysis of the four terms<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, I will suggest that stereotyping is a natural and inevitable part of human cognition and so cannot be satisfactorily addressed through reasoning and persuasion. Instead, I propose that experiential activities are the way to modify stereotypes and limit their pernicious consequences for intercultural interactions.

In intercultural education and training, the standard approach to prejudice has been to regard it as a glitch in the system, an unfortunate impediment to smoother understanding between people of different backgrounds and different appearances. Lectures and awareness-raising exercises are offered on the evils of prejudice; the necessity of overcoming and seeing beyond it; how to recognize it in self and others; and how to go about removing it from one's world view (see "Lesson 5," 2019, January 29 for a typical example).

The continuing prevalence of prejudice in the work and practice of even the most highly trained and highly sensitized intercultural practitioners must be taken as evidence that the traditional approach has so far been less than successful. Psychologists Banaji and Greenwald (2016) describe their shock when, after spending many years developing an instrument to detect implicit biases in the reactions of others, they used their instrument on themselves and found prejudices hiding in their own minds. Clearly, the problem is more deeply rooted than admonitions and awareness-raising activities can reach. In fact, there is a growing consensus among cognitive psychologists (Feldman Barrett, 2020), philosophers (Clark, 2015), and neuroscientists (Seth, 2021) that bias, far from being a glitch, is an essential component of human perception.

### **Stereotypes at the Centre of Perception**

The standard model of perception has its beginning with sensory data. Light waves, sound waves, smells, tastes, or tactile information from the perceived object enter the body through the appropriate sensory organ and are passed, through the nervous system, to the brain. The brain then matches the signals received from the nervous system to a catalogue

---

<sup>1</sup> I am also grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper who pointed me in the direction of Barthes' (1970/1975) *discours* on stereotypes and strategies for expanding them.

of perceptual categories, gradually narrowing its search for meaning in the sensory data until it has identified the object. As I write this, sunshine passing through my window is causing my skin to tingle and my brain to identify the cause of that tingling as the phenomenon we call “warmth from sunshine.”

The new understanding of perception turns the standard model on its head and places prediction, rather than sensory information, at the heart of perception. In this new model, appropriately called Predictive Processing, perception begins when the brain makes predictions about what is likely to be perceived in a given context. These predictions are based on a distillation of knowledge gained from previous encounters in similar contexts: the greater our experience of the context, the more accurate our predictions are likely to be. In this model, the role of sensory information is to confirm or disconfirm the prediction. If the prediction is entirely accurate, no further attention is paid to that part of the sensory signals, and I can continue to write without constantly having to identify the source of the tingling feeling on my skin. If the prediction is inaccurate in some way, more attention is paid to the information from the senses and this is used to modify the brain’s understanding of the current context in order to make better predictions about similar contexts in the future.

The great advantage of the predictive model is that it is efficient: it is no longer necessary to devote perceptual resources to gathering and analysing data on every sensory experience as though it were unique and unprecedented. The vast majority of the estimated 11 million bits of information we receive from our environment at any one moment (Zimmerman, 1986) can safely be ignored as it has already been predicted, and we can use our rather limited perceptual resources (roughly 40 bits of processing capacity at any moment, Zimmerman, 1987) to focus on what is new and unexpected. The alternative to processing perception in this way would be to live in a constant state of surprise (akin to what interculturalists would call “severe culture shock”), where everything is new and unexpected and the perceiver soon suffers from sensory overload and exhaustion.

One important element of the efficiency inherent in predictive processing is its speed. It is much faster to compare nerve impulses from our sensory organs with those we expect to receive than to analyse each impulse, classify it, filter it through various levels of our mental catalogue, and finally assign a unique meaning to it. In evolutionary terms, speed means survival. Our environment is full of both dangers and opportunities. Speed in recognizing these dangers and opportunities is a crucial element in our survival not only as individuals

but also as a species: whether it is the danger from a pouncing predator or an approaching motor vehicle, or the opportunity presented by a tasty prey or a time-limited bargain at the supermarket. To survive, we need to be fast in both avoiding dangers and seizing opportunities.

Our perceptual system, then, has evolved to react quickly based on the predictions we make. Those predictions are, in turn, based on past experiences. Through repeated exposure to the sensory messages associated with a phenomenon, our brains come to be able to predict those messages and thereby react quickly to it. Of course, no two experiences are exactly the same, so the brain must have a mechanism for recognizing the essence of a phenomenon, based on its similarities with other closely related phenomena. A simple object like a chair can be used to illustrate this. We all have experiences of many different kinds of chair (depicted in *Figure 1*). While each of these chairs is different, they all share an essential “chairness” (illustrated in *Figure 2*) that can be used to make rapid decisions about whether something (or rather, a cluster of sensory information) is or is not a chair.

**Figure 1**

*Many different kinds of chair*



**Figure 2**

*Essential "chairness."*



This "essence of chairness" is a stereotype. It is not a real chair. It lacks many of the nuanced and distinguishing features of any of the real chairs in Figure 1, but as a rough-and-ready prediction to identify a chair, it is sufficient in most contexts. This is how we do the bulk of our perception: using rough-and-ready stereotypes to make predictions that enable us to deal with the world quickly and efficiently.

In other words: stereotypes are at the centre of our perceptual system. They are not an unfortunate glitch. From the chair example, one can quite see how the same principle is applied to people, and then to people of readily identifiable ethnic or national backgrounds.

### **Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow**

Kahneman (2011) calls this fast-thinking set of brain systems "System 1." Its operations are characterized as fast, intuitive, and largely unconscious. It allows us to respond to our environment in real time, based on a rough-and-ready series of predictions that are "good enough" for us to deal with most situations without even being aware that we are thinking about them. It is behind the automatic pump of adrenalin that follows the perception of a raging bull nearby. It is behind the impulse buying of sweet and sugary snacks. It leads our reaction to any change in our environment, without us having to think about it. As we have

seen, it is driven by stereotypes, whether innocuous ones of chairs or more pernicious ones about people.

Most of the time, we are not even aware that it is operating: we do not consciously decide to run from the bull, put the snack in our basket, or react in a certain way to a person. Our reactions are intuitive and, even after the event, often not accessible for rational analysis. Just as Predictive Processing takes care of most of the sensory information around us, System 1, of which Predictive Processing forms a part, takes care of many of our actions and reactions. We do not have to think about them.

It is not, however, a perfect system, just as the stereotypes on which it is based (like the chair in Figure 2) are not perfect representations of reality. It can lead us astray, as it clearly does in judgements we make about people based on their appearance or ethnic background. This is the price we pay for the speed of perception and action afforded by System 1. "Sufficient for most situations" is not the same as "good enough always."

Counter-balancing this rapid, instinctual, largely unconscious decision maker, and compensating for some of its deficiencies, is Kahneman's System 2. It is slow, laborious, and usually conscious. These are the thoughts we are aware of: planning, thinking things through, working out the best course of action, using our reason, taking rational decisions. But, because it is slow, it is unsuited to survival in real time. The bull, the snacks, even the rapidly approaching person require an immediate response, but System 2 is often too slow to provide one and is usually not aware that a response is required until after it has been made.

In terms of prejudice, System 1 contains the biased but quick assumptions about people we meet and System 2 contains our rational understanding that people are not interchangeable stereotypes but each represents a unique constellation of qualities and attributes. By the time System 2 gets to speak up, though, it is often too late: System 1 has already reacted.

Haidt (2012) takes Kahneman's two-system metaphor one step further and sees System 1 as an elephant lumbering out of control across the landscape, with System 2 as a lawyer, clinging on to the elephant's back and offering rationales for the elephant's behaviour. The point of Haidt's analogy is that not only does System 2 have very little control over the actions of System 1 (the out-of-control-elephant) but it also has no access to the basis of System 1's actions and can only, like any lawyer, offer rationales for its client's behaviour.



To return to our consideration of prejudice: we now have an intuitive, prejudiced elephant propelling a lawyer who has understood our lessons about the evils of prejudice. The lawyer does not know why the elephant is behaving as it does but can make a fairly convincing (though often fictitious) case that the elephant's actions are not based on prejudice. This is Banaji and Greenwald's (2016) "implicit bias": the lawyer is able to argue convincingly that the person is not acting out of prejudice (convincing especially to the person who is acting), while the elephant continues on its instinctual, biased way.

### **Talk to the Elephant**

The problem with telling people they should not be prejudiced is that we are talking to the lawyer. The lawyer already knows this, or soon takes it on board and incorporates it into rationales for the elephant's behaviour. But the lawyer usually neither controls nor understands the elephant's actions. We are talking to the wrong person. Even the activities we use to raise awareness of prejudice are often actually raising the lawyer's awareness rather than the elephant's. This is why campaigns such as "Stamp Out Racism" or "Gender Equality Week" encounter only limited success; they let the lawyer know that racism or sexism is not acceptable but leave the elephant's behaviour largely unchanged.

Much intercultural training and education is posited on the assumption that the lawyer can, to some extent, influence the elephant's behaviour. Haidt (2012) offers some evidence that this is indeed possible, but, like everything the lawyer does, it is slow, effortful work, and difficult to sustain over a period of time. Any attempt by the lawyer to control or counteract the elephant's prejudices must be based on an awareness that the elephant is acting out of prejudice. Such awareness is often not possible, since the lawyer does not have access to the elephant's thinking. Furthermore, the lawyer is much better at explaining away the prejudiced behaviour ("This isn't prejudice. I'm not a prejudiced person") than counteracting it.

In terms of the metaphor, the remedy seems simple: Talk to the elephant. But how are we to do this?

System 1 distills the stereotypes for use in its predictions from previous experience. All the chairs it has ever encountered contribute to its preconception of what a chair is like. This experience can be direct (seeing, touching, sitting on a chair) or indirect, from other people (hearing about or reading about other people's experience of chairs). If we are to change

a person's prejudices, we need to use experience, not lectures, slogans, or awareness-raising activities.

It is clear that evolution has provided us with a mechanism for changing preconceived ideas. Again, this is a matter of survival for the individual and the species. The mechanism comes into operation when a prediction made by the brain does not match the sensory information it is receiving: the new information modifies the brain's inner model so that a more accurate prediction can be generated the next time a similar situation is encountered.

The process is not fast, especially if the previously held prejudice has allowed the person to function well for a long time and has thus been repeatedly reinforced. But it is possible. The prejudices on which System 1 operates are formed on a probabilistic basis: the more counter-examples a person encounters, the more nuanced a prejudice is likely to become. To give a personal example: before I came to Japan, my predictions about greeting people for the first time were that either they would want to shake my hand (highly probable – I grew up in the UK) or kiss me (possible, but not very likely – I had spent a short time in France). Anything else was “abnormal” (a probability approaching zero). The more time I spend in Japan though, the higher the probability I attach to a third option, bowing. My shake-or-kiss prediction has let me down so many times that my prejudices have now been modified to include bowing, with a fairly high probability.

### ***How to Talk to the Elephant***

Our task, then, is to provide experiences (not lectures, understanding, or awareness – all of these speak to System 1), experiences that provide corrections to already-formed prejudices. The means for doing this are already part of the interculturalist's toolbox. They include:

- Foreign travel
- Study abroad
- Seeking out people who are different
- Working, and eating with them
- Simulation games
- Role-play activities
- Stories, TV dramas, and movies on relevant topics

Each of these offers the opportunity to experience the lives of other people vicariously, just the kind of experience that is needed in order to modify and nuance stereotypes about them. The first two are not available to everybody for financial and, more recently, public

health, reasons, but every opportunity should be taken to encourage and facilitate encounters with people from environments outside of familiar contexts.

In the absence of chances to travel, inviting people from unfamiliar contexts into the intercultural classroom or priming our students/trainees to seek them out and interact with them can provide similar stereotype-modifying experiences, especially if eating or working together is involved. If encounters with such people are unavailable, role-plays and simulation games in which behavioural expectations are confounded provide another means of communicating with the elephant.

The inclusion of stories, dramas, and movies may seem less intuitive than some of the other items on the list, but they, too, provide vicarious access to other people's lives and perspectives, whether the people are real or fictitious. Indeed, Pinker (2011) attributes the rise in civility and compassion for other human beings, which he traces from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, partly to the availability of cheap, mass-produced novels that allowed readers to share in the lives of others from the inside.

Each of these activities should be followed an opportunity to reflect on what has been learnt and to share reflections with others. What is important here is not, as a traditional view might have it, the chance to rationalise and verbalise the lessons drawn from experience, as rationalisation and verbalisation speak to System 2. What is important is the role of reflection in amplifying message to System 1: by retrieving an experience from memory, we let the elephant experience it once more; and by sharing it with others and learning about their experience, we engage the social circuits of our brain. Both repetition (Schmelzer, 2015) and (social) sharing (Lieberman, 2013) mark an experience as important and increase the chance that it will become part of the assumptions on which System 1 bases its predictions.

None of the activities described above is new to interculturalists, but it is possible that their efficacy in addressing prejudice has been under-appreciated in the past. Each allows us to speak to the elephant, through experience, the language it understands, and to avoid the pitfalls of dealing only with the lawyer.

## Conclusion

Dealing with the nexus of bias, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination remains a difficult challenge for interculturalists. What I have suggested here is that the reason the results of traditional approaches to the nexus often produce disappointing results is that they are based on an outdated understanding of human cognition. To address issues connected with the nexus, we need to speak not to the rational, conscious mind but to the largely unconscious part, which is responsible for the majority of our actions and usually operates below the level of consciousness. This part of our mind responds to the lessons of experience rather than the arguments and admonitions of a teacher or trainer. We can best help people to overcome their prejudices by providing them with experiences which allow them to understand the perspectives of other people. By talking to the elephant, rather than arguing with the lawyer, we can exercise influence over the kinds of stereotypes on which people base their actions.

## References

- Banaji, M. R. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (2016). *Blindspot: Hidden biases of good people*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Clark, A. (2015). *Surfing uncertainty: Prediction, action, and the embodied mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feldman Barrett, L. (2020). *Seven and a half lessons about the brain*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books.
- Fiske, S. T. (2023). Prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping. In R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Eds), *Noba textbook series: Psychology*. Champaign, IL: DEF. Retrieved from <http://noba.to/jfkx7nrd>
- Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Lesson 5: Prejudice and stereotypes. (2019, January 11). Retrieved from <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/secondary-education-resources/lesson-plan-ideas/lesson-5-prejudice-and-stereotypes>
- Lieberman, M. (2013). *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group.
- Barthes, R. (1975). *S/Z: An essay* (R. Miller, Trans.). Hill and Lang. (Original work published 1970)
- Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. London, UK: Penguin Books.

- Schmelzer, G. (2015). *Understanding learning and memory: The neuroscience of memory*. Retrieved from <http://gretchenschmelzer.com/blog-1/2015/1/11/understanding-learning-and-memory-the-neuroscience-of-repetition>
- Seth, A. (2021). *Being you: A new science of consciousness*. Boston, MA: Dutton.
- Shaules, J., & van der Pol, Y. (Presenters). (2021, April 15). Episode 9: Bias is not bias [Audio podcast]. In J. Shaules (Producer), *Deep culture podcast*. Retrieved from <https://japanintercultural.org/podcast/episode-9-bias-is-not-bias/>
- Zimmerman, M. (1986). Neurophysiology of sensory systems. In R. F Schmidt (Ed.), *Fundamentals of sensory systems*. New York, NY: Springer.

### ***Author's Biography***

*Stephen M. Ryan* works at Sanyo Gakuen University in Okayama, Japan. He teaches a course in understanding people from different backgrounds and prepares students from Japan to study abroad. Correspondence should be sent to: [stephen05summer@yahoo.com](mailto:stephen05summer@yahoo.com)