

Interethnic Misunderstanding in Institutional Talk:
The Revelatory Potential and Limitations of Contextualization Cues

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Introduction

Interethnic misunderstanding is a broad field of study that owes much to the work of the linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz. His microanalysis of gatekeeping encounters (such as job interviews) has shed light on sources of misunderstanding and miscommunication via the interactional sociolinguistics (IS) approach. A key concept in this method is the notion of contextualization cues, discussed in more detail in the next section. The purpose of this paper is to review critiques of the IS approach to examining interethnic misunderstanding, with specific reference to contextualization cues and what they can and cannot reveal.

While this large field has examined both informal and formal contexts, and has branched out to topics such as gender-as-culture (as seen in the work of Deborah Tannen) this paper shall focus on more formal, institutional talk and on intercultural communication in the more traditional sense of interethnic encounters. Institutional settings deserve attention because they are high-stakes contexts that can have ramifications on the participants, such as whether or not they get jobs, housing, helpful advice, or positive evaluations at school or at work.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first provides background on the theoretical foundations and terminology of the area of study. The second aims to show how interactional sociolinguistics has examined misunderstanding in major institutional contexts (e.g. job interviews, advice centers, academic advising, and university seminars). The next section is key as it discusses two major critiques of the approach: the neglect of power differentials and racism, and the problem of culture as a term and a concept in contemporary society. Both critiques are concerned with microanalysis's narrow focus and with the difficulty of applying culture to contextualization cues. The paper concludes with suggestions for research directions and a brief discussion of pedagogical implications.

Background: Theoretical Foundations & Terminology

Very generally, *contextualization cues* are any linguistic or paralinguistic signals that give meaning to an utterance. They are present in the surface structure of the message and are thus empirically detectable (Gumperz 1982, 1992). Gumperz (1982) emphasizes suprasegmental features as crucial to the process of conversational inference. Levinson (2003), a student of Gumperz, clarifies that cues are first prosodic or paralinguistic in nature, and that when they are lexical or grammatical they are a matter of fine-tuned distinctions not readily observed without some analysis, such as word choice or register and/or minor grammatical structures such as particles. Furthermore, cues are “non-propositional content, e.g. affectual, rhetorical, or metalinguistic” and “reliant on a large dose of inferencing” (Levinson 2003, p.37) in that a cue can mean one thing in one context and something entirely different in another. This is an important point: cues are context-dependent. What the cues depend upon are *co-occurrence expectations*. We develop these expectations through all of our previous interactions (informed by culture and society); they help us form hypotheses about an interaction (contextual presuppositions) and then interpret meaning as the interaction moves forward. This interpretation is *conversational inference*.

Contextualization cues are acquired through “rich exposure to a communicative tradition” (Levinson, 2003, p.37) and are specific to cultures and speech communities, that is, groups that interact with one another and share linguistic signs and expectations about what is appropriate within a certain speech activity or speech event. What concerns Gumperz and many others is what happens when those expectations do not match and misunderstandings arise, which may be more prone to happen in interethnic or intercultural encounters. In certain contexts, a mismatch of expectations can have dire consequences, such as the creation and/or reinforcement of racial

and ethnic stereotypes. This is explained by the notion of *complementary schismogenesis*, which is when small initial differences in social interaction between two or more groups become progressively larger in reaction to one another until perspectives of each group become skewed, antagonism develops, and communication breaks down (Bateson, 1935). Gumperz contends that the stereotyping that comes from complementary schismogenesis is a result of different uses and interpretations of contextualization cues, and that because these cues are generally implicit, interactants cannot consciously repair the miscommunication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

How I.S. Can Elucidate Intercultural Misunderstanding

The following discussion demonstrates the basic methods of the I.S. approach, highlighting how different contextualization conventions in different cultures can lead to miscommunication (and frustration). All the studies provide a comparison of the conventions of each culture (or refer to other studies that do), and then conduct a microanalysis of interactions to see how the intercultural encounters lead to misinterpretations. The institutional contexts here are advice centers, job interviews, and university seminars.

Gumperz and Roberts (1991) studied counseling sessions at two advice centers in the United Kingdom, a “neighborhood center” and an “Asian Resource Center,” examining British-British, Punjabi-Punjabi, and British-Punjabi encounters. Through comparisons of the British-British and Punjabi-Punjabi encounters, they were able to identify reasons for misunderstanding in the intercultural interaction, despite the fact that the Punjabi counselor had a native-like command of English. These reasons included different nonverbal signals and different conventions of speech etiquette. Analysis of interactions at the Asian Resource Center found a high number of passive constructions (versus a high number of “I” constructions at the neighborhood center) and significantly different uses of gaze from that of the British

interlocutors. Gumperz and Roberts proposed that speakers of Punjabi mapped Punjabi or South Asian conventions onto their English and this explains communication difficulties with British English speakers unfamiliar with South Asian conventions. In these gate keeping encounters, miscommunication and mismatched expectations can cause discomfort and negative judgments on the part of the gatekeeper, and negative consequences as a result (Jefferson & Lee, 1981 as cited in Gumperz & Roberts, 1991).

Similarly, Gumperz (1999) shows how a Pakistani man with a relatively decent command of English stumbles through a job interview and misses key cues to “sell” himself and elaborate on past work experience. The interviewers stress words such as “why,” “like,” and “trade” in an effort to give reasons for wanting to apply for the job; the interviewee hesitates (for as long as a second) and simply replies that there is “more job prospect” (p.391). Gumperz notes how the interviewee uses his native contextualization system to interpret the question and thus does not share the expectations of the interviewers, whereas a native speaker of English may have picked up on this contrastive accenting. In discussing another job interview studied by Gumperz (Gumperz, 1979, as cited in Sarangi, 1994), Sarangi (1994) remarks native speakers could also have a difficult time with indirect questions. Nevertheless, according to Gumperz (1999), these interviewers were more successful eliciting the answers they needed from native English speakers, using similar questioning tactics.

Another example of Gumperz’s (1997) work with intercultural institutional examples is the encounter of Don and Lee, an Indian student and an ESL instructor at an adult education center. Don and Lee get into a rather heated discussion about whether Don should take a course at a nearby community college. Gumperz shows how Lee “relies on pausing, accenting, pitch, register, and tempo shifts to convey information give her argument rhetorical force” (p.238).

Meanwhile, Don's phrase-final signaling is less differentiated than Lee's and probably has different meanings, coming from his own culture's contextualization system. As a result, Lee thought Don felt insulted by her while Don was using Indian rhetorical strategies for seeking help in hierarchical contexts. The different expectations created different interpretations and a rather frustrating encounter (anyone who reads the transcript will see just how exasperated the two appear).

Another (quite recent) study within the academic context examines silence as a misinterpreted cue. Nakane (2006) examined silence and politeness orientation among Japanese and Australian students in Australian university seminars. Silence can have a wide variety of meanings and different valuations in different societies and among different interlocutors (Tannen, 1985). Therefore, Nakane rightly notes that studying silence can be problematic and that follow-up interviews with participants do not necessarily provide insight or sufficient explanation as to why they were silent at any one moment; nevertheless her study revealed crucial cultural differences.

Nakane (2006) found two main reasons for silence among Japanese students: to maintain positive face, and to prevent face-threatening action (FTA). Maintaining positive face includes second language anxiety (fear of saying something incorrectly), and maintaining "correctness" (that is, fear of saying the "wrong" answer, being unsure of the "right" answer). In terms of preventing FTA, Japanese students refrained from speaking when disagreeing with lecturers. It is important to note that Japanese students were not reticent when familiar with the topic (such as Japanese linguistics) and when professors were not perceived as "strict" or "demanding." Nakane notes this is all consistent with the Japanese educational setting; in Australia, however, silence can be seen as a threat to lecturers' face and represents an unwillingness to learn.

Moreover, disagreement is seen as a sign of engagement and enthusiasm. Japanese students that remained silent thus risked negative evaluation. Nakane concluded with the important suggestion of studying Australian students' politeness orientation in their second languages. This type of research could give significant insight into whether second language anxiety is a major factor in intercultural misunderstanding.

To summarize, different uses of contextualization cues (such as prosody, grammatical structure, gaze, and even silence) can easily lead to different interpretations of meaning in interaction. The extent to which these cues can explain interethnic understanding and the extent to which these cues can be attributed to culture are discussed below.

Critiques of the IS Approach to Intercultural (Mis)communication

Several scholars have claimed that IS, in studying intercultural miscommunication, has neglected historically rooted racial prejudice and other macrosocial factors not readily available in surface messages (Shea, 1994; Sarangi, 1994; Meeuwis, 1994). Others have posited that the term "culture" is itself slippery, particularly in this mobile, globalized era (Sarangi, 1994; Hartog, 2006).

Sarangi (1994) and Shea (1994) argue that one must address asymmetries in interactions, looking at power relationships more explicitly, such as interviewer-interviewee, in light of the fact that the interviewer can choose to shut out the interviewee and take advantage of misunderstandings. Shea (1994) maintains that "a contrastive focus on differing features of discourse shifts attention away from the quality of participations and whether the interactants are recognized, heard, and responded to" (p.381). In Shea's study, four NS-NNS interactions were examined between Japanese students and an advisor, a professor, two peers, and one peer. He analyzed them for whether production was symmetrical or asymmetrical and whether

perspectives were congruous or incongruous, as an example of how one might interpret the quality of the interaction. Thus he pays less attention to cues (the distracting features of discourse) and looks more at the overall participation.

In critiquing Gumperz's assertion that one cannot readily learn the contextualization conventions of another culture, Shea (1994) states that those with "sufficient motivation" can adjust and adopt different cues in multicultural contexts. It is unclear whether this means within the classroom or outside the classroom, consciously and frequently interacting with the "dominant" group in the multicultural setting, or something more diffuse and unconscious. Gumperz (1999) maintains that one cannot learn them within a set period of time—that its acquisition is an ongoing process that requires multiple and frequent interactions. Furthermore, Gumperz (1999 and elsewhere) maintains that it is *informal* contact that aids acquisition of contextualization conventions, and not every group has access to this informal contact due in part to the very macrosocial factors Shea and others argue are being neglected. To be fair, the main difference in opinion is more related to the absence of the macro within the method of the analysis itself—the study below attempts to remedy that.

Meeuwis (1994) rather forcefully suggests that the continual neglect of "extra-situational" parameters run the risk of "blinding us...and give rise to a misleading view of the notion of 'context' as limited to what is materially observable in micro-level structures" (p.393). He examined Tanzanian and South Korean junior engineers at a training course in Belgium given by Flemish instructors in English. The engineers were segregated into different classes and the instructors were interviewed at the end of course and asked to evaluate the students. Meeuwis argues that though the data revealed comparable types of communication breakdown in both groups of students, the Korean students had more sources of "potential breakdown", as speakers

of English as a foreign language, and were given more opportunities for negotiation of meaning (“leniency”). The Tanzanian students, whose language of instruction in Tanzania was English, were given fewer opportunities to negotiate meaning. Significantly, they did not back channel or ask questions, which is the norm for Tanzanian schooling; this led to the Flemish perception of the Tanzanian engineers as “uncommitted” and “unmotivated” and led to more “testiness” (irritation on the instructors’ part) than “leniency.” One might note that Gumperz’s (1982) notion of “conversational cooperation” (including cues such as ask back channeling [p.163]) within a training setting must be different for the Tanzanian and Flemish engineers and perhaps somehow similar for the Flemish and the South Koreans. After the course, the Tanzanians were evaluated as “uncooperative, boorish, and indifferent” whereas the Koreans were “more interested, more devoted, more motivated, and more intelligent” (p.400). This cannot be explained entirely by different contextualization conventions. Meeuwis concludes that one cannot ignore Belgian and Western European stereotypes of Africans and East Asians and that “historically rooted ethnic prejudices and stereotypes mediate conversational situations as extra- or pre-conversational factors” (p.402). He acknowledges that IS takes into account macrosocial factors; what he calls for is an integration of macro-analysis into the microanalysis-- a top-down application to an approach that is bottom-up.

Similar to Meeuwis’s (1994) concern that different contextualization conventions are enough to explain intercultural misunderstanding, Sarangi (1994) is concerned with the overemphasis of contextualization cues as a way of understanding culture; he claims that because cues are also a function of situational and societal structures, it is difficult to extract the cultural element of contextualization. Sarangi examines job interviews as Gumperz had, with South Asian applicants and British interviewers. He posits that one must look more explicitly at other

situational aspects of the encounter, such as the power differential between interviewer and interviewee, and argues that not all misunderstandings are culturally-based and are a matter of being familiar with how interviews are conducted—something a native speaker of the language can have trouble with as well. While Sarangi does not doubt the significance and usefulness of contextualization cues in studying intercultural interaction, he does take issue with lingering over the aspect of culture more so than other situational aspects, such as the institution.

Others have argued that a thorough understanding of the institution (not just the cultures involved) can provide crucial insight for the encounter. This does not really contradict Gumperz's assertion that meaning is context-dependent, however it does prescribe a more institution-specific approach. One such study is discussed below.

Hartog (2006) rightly points out that intercultural communication is less clear cut today than it was for Gumperz in the 1970s: increased mobilization, globalization, and thus contact between cultures has changed the nature of intercultural communication, as has the fact that second and third generation migrants may face different types of encounters than the first generation migrants studied by Gumperz. She questions the notion of "misunderstanding" as a useful term for the field of intercultural communication.

To illustrate, Hartog (2006) examined the encounter of a Turkish couple seeking genetic counseling in Germany from a German doctor; a Turkish intern at the hospital (not a professional interpreter) acted as mediator. The doctor had to inform the couple that the genetic flaw lay in the wife's genes and feared a stereotypical response from the husband, reprimanding the wife. The husband says, "*Hatun, bi daha mievlensem n'apsam?*" (Wife, ought I to marry again, what ought I to do? [p.184]). As Hartog explains, his word choice (*hatun* is an old Ottoman word used ironically) and use of rhetorical questioning is a joking aside to his wife, not directed at the

doctor or intern. The intern, however, translates his aside to the doctor literally, meeting the doctor's expectation of a stereotypical reaction, and the husband switches to his "slightly faulty German" (p.185) to explain to the doctor that he was joking and that he loves his wife. Hartog suggests that the intern is "so wedded to the institution that he forgot the nuances of his mother tongue" (p.183). This finding is fascinating in that it shows a shift in contextualization conventions on the part of the mediator associated with the institution to the extent that previous conventions from the native language marking irony and humor appear forgotten or lost. Of course this could be only one instance, but as others have argued the need for a more close examination of institutions (e.g. Sarangi, 1994; Cicourel, 1995), one might seriously consider Hartog's suggestion of separating the role of the institution and the role of culture by first analyzing the workings of the institution before analyzing cultural encounters.

Both Sarangi (1994) and Hartog (2006) argue that the term culture is itself difficult, as it is an ever-shifting concept in contemporary society. This does not differ dramatically from the notion of situated inference, but does point to a difficulty in continuing empirical research within this framework. Both suggest a more institution-specific approach, among other things.

Gumperz (1999) responds to these critiques though not citing those papers specifically, but work in a more directly anthropological vein. This helps clarify and reframe his ideas but does not ultimately change his position; he only returns to data he has already presented in previous papers and reanalyzes and clarifies his analysis, concluding that he has, in fact, focused on situated interpretation and that he has not ignored the macrosocial factors. He does not go far as to say that a macroanalysis needs to be applied to the microanalysis as some of the above studies have suggested. Elsewhere he has argued that the "social outcomes and interactional consequences of communicative misalignment are far greater than any single analysis can

show.” (Gumperz, 2001, p.226). Thus it seems he does not think such a macroanalysis can be integrated into the microanalysis. Of the critiques discussed, he does unequivocally agree, however, that the blurred cultural boundaries has made this type of analysis more difficult and that becoming more institution-specific may be a helpful direction to take (Gumperz, 1999). Thus the method might benefit from some changes.

Conclusion

No one disputes the usefulness of contextualization cues in examining interaction (at least not in the studies reviewed here). Concerns over what is lost or invisible in this type of microanalysis (that is, larger social factors such as racism) and concerns over how, when, or whether to attribute culture to cues, however, have been raised.

At this point one might suggest a multi-pronged approach in research. That is, scholars do not necessarily need to stop conducting the contrastive, ethnographic studies as Gumperz (1999) has shown the use of them and reiterated their macrosocial importance; indeed, there are still enclaves of migrant communities that keep to themselves except in service encounters and formal hierarchical encounters, just as the populations studied by Gumperz did in the 1970s.

At the same time, however, it is of utmost importance to consider the blurred boundaries and find new methods of examining these more permeable group boundaries and the shifting notion of culture. As Hartog (2006) notes, not every interaction is intercultural. Increasing interaction amongst previously isolated groups will change contextualization conventions, and it is possible that these conventions will change more often as globalization progresses. Furthermore, the study of institutions as cultures and how they develop their own conventions of communication is an important new direction. How do these speech communities affect intercultural communication? Do they change the contextualization conventions of those working within the

institution, and if so, how? Are the gatekeepers of various institutions becoming more aware of multicultural communication, and is this another factor changing institutional interactions?

The bottom-up approach, as Meeuwis (1994) calls it, is still a valuable and necessary approach to examining data. His suggestion to apply a top-down perspective may be of use, with some very careful consideration. One must not apply one's own biases to the data; as Cicourel (1995) notes, "the notion of symbolic power is appealing intuitively yet difficult to identify with data that have convincing surface validity" (p.367). Nevertheless, Meeuwis (1994) has shown how certain racial prejudices are not explicitly stated in conversation but can have an effect on interpretation and thus influence it. Finding ways to study this concept as Meeuwis has may be helpful in uncovering instances of more covert discrimination.

The significance of this research does not stop here: one should also consider the pedagogical implications. Though Gumperz insists that contextualization conventions are not learnable and are only acquired through frequent informal interactions over a lifetime, a language instructor could potentially exploit the salient features of communication to help language learners look beyond grammar and the lexicon. Surely the relatively recent shift of emphasis in the teaching of pronunciation to suprasegmentals, a major type of contextualization cue, reflects this notion. Just because Gumperz claims it is not possible does not mean a creative teacher cannot find ways to at least make language learners more aware of these nuances. Finally, making this area of study a part of teacher education could also help prevent such encounters as the one between Don and Lee. While it may be difficult to attribute culture to contextualization conventions in this day and age, it is still important that teachers be aware that different conventions shape the way that students interact.

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