CMU J. Sci. 17(2013) 19-33

NEGOTIATING COMMUNICATION AND BUILDING RELATION ACROSS CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

There have been a number of studies that explores how people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds communicate. However, many of these investigations tend to focus on socio-pragmatic failures, communication breakdowns, and the negative consequences of intercultural communication. The study aims to present a positive aspect of communication across cultures. It analyzed transcriptions of naturally occurring spoken data that show how lingua franca speakers of English and their teacher handle a misunderstanding and turn it into an opportunity for building social relations. Using linguistic ethnography as a methodology, the findings of the study demonstrate that limited language proficiency and differences of discourse conventions can, indeed, lead to miscommunication. However, the results also suggest that if speakers collaboratively work to handle the repair, miscommunication can lead to a positive outcome.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, miscommunication, culture, English as a lingua franca*

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Note: This research was funded by The Open University UK.

INTRODUCTION

Communication amongst individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic background has been likened to using signposts on a journey; however, these signposts have been turned around that if you try to follow them you end up in the wrong path (Tannen, 1984). What makes using these signposts more difficult is that they are deemed to be culturally relative. In other words, even if the signposts were turned around and written in an international language like English, misunderstanding is still likely to occur due to the different ways that people interpret events and "cut up reality or categorise experience" (Kramsch, 1998, p.3).

In intercultural contexts such as a second language classroom, practically everything can go wrong including 'when to talk,' 'what to say,' 'pacing and pausing,' 'listenership,' 'intonation,' 'formulaicity,' and 'indirectness' (Tannen, 1984). Indeed, factors such as differences in the interpretation of silence (Nakane, 2006), difference in pragmatic and sociocultural orientation (Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz, 2001; Gass & Varonis, 1991; Lantolf & Genung, 2002; Scollon, 1999; Thomas, 1984; Zamborlin, 2007) have been linked to intercultural misunderstanding. It has been argued that in intercultural contexts, our cultural interpretation mechanisms do not always operate effectively (Fox, 1997, p.89).

Given the dominant literature which details the problematic aspects of intercultural communication, there is an urgent need for an equally valid area of enquiry which deals with positive aspects of communication in a foreign language classroom. Thus, this study aims to describe how individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds negotiate (mis)communication and to explore how misunderstanding can provide opportunities for gaining valuable insights about effective communication across cultures.

METHODOLOGY

Linguistic Ethnography was deemed to be the most suitable methodology in investigating the strategies and resources used by a diverse group of English learners to negotiate communication. Linguistic Ethnography, a relatively new and very dynamic scholarly discipline with roots in the UK, combines linguistics and ethnography to understand spoken and written discourse. It enables the researcher to draw from analyst-imposed categories of text analysis provided by linguistics. At the same time, it ensures that the analyst takes into consideration self-reflexivity and sensitivity to context provided by ethnography (Rampton, 2010). Rigor in research is maintained by combining the 'formal, structured tools of language description' (Tusting & Maybin, 2007, p. 579) and open-ended, contextually bound insights offered by ethnography.

Methods of Data and Research Context

The principal method used to collect language data was participant observation with audio recording supplemented by observation notes, semi-structured interviews and documentary evidence in the form of classroom hand-outs, photographs and publicly available documents. The foci of analysis in this article are transcriptions of audio recorded classroom talk in a computer class.

The research site was a college in a western Canada which oversaw Career Program for Immigrants (CPI), a 12-week employment preparation class for immigrants. Field work was conducted between September and November 2009.

There were a total of seven respondents from Congo, Haiti, Bangladesh, Jordan, Philippines, and India (2 students) who were between 25 to 50 years old. All were non-native speakers of English who were looking for suitable employment in Canada. Three teachers and a job placement facilitator were involved in the program delivery. Classes were from 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM which included lessons in English for employment, job search techniques, and computer literacy.

To collect spoken interactions, the researcher attended the computer classes three times a week for six of the 12 weeks. Two unobtrusive audio recording devices, one at the front and another in the middle of the room, were used to collect naturalistic spoken data. The researcher sat at the back of the room and took field notes. The recorded interactions were then transcribed and later on analyzed. Serendipitous and semi-structured interviews with the adult students and their teachers were also conducted to get first-hand comments on the audio recordings.

Data Analysis

Transcription of audio recorded data were analyzed drawing inspiration from Aston's (1988; 1993) notion of comity and Brown's and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Aston provided the analytic lens in exploring how language learners linguistically establish and maintain harmonious relations, and share feelings and attitudes rather than just knowledge. Brown & Levinson's categories of linguistic politeness were useful in understanding how interactants invoke solidarity and deference.

In order to understand fully how participants were making sense of each other through discourse, it was necessary to borrow aspects of conversation analysis (CA) and interactional sociolinguistics (IS). Insights from CA were used to explore the participants' joint efforts in their

negation of meaning realised through the turn-taking mechanism. IS, on the other hand, enables the kind of data exploration that considers not only the interactants' overt or observable utterances, but also the socio-cultural and institutional factors that influence the interaction. It shows the dynamic negotiation of meaning resulting from interaction (Tannen, 2005, p. 205).

As stated earlier, spoken data were collected from a computer class with seven immigrant students in attendance and one Canadian teacher. The class was set up to be self-paced and very hands-on, so there was little front line instruction. Kate (a pseudonym) was the computer literacy instructor. She was a Canadian-born native speaker of English.

The examples in this section show how Kate engaged the students in 'off task' social talk which co-existed harmoniously with the on-going computer activity. Participation in the conversation was voluntary in a way that the students navigated from being active contributors to talk to over hearers. The students actively participating in the talk analyzed here were Rachana or Rach (from India), Phillip (from Congo), Faisal (from Bangladesh) and Velyvet or Vely (from Haiti). All the names contained are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. Transcription conventions are found in the Appendix.

In the excerpt, Kate was trying to inject a little bit of humor by telling the class a funny riddle. Notice how the misunderstanding (synonymously used with 'miscommunication' in this paper) unfolded:

1	Kate	do you guys know why frogs are so happy?
2	Rach	frog?
3	Kate	yeah! (.)Why are frogs so happy?
4	Mabel	(laughs quietly)
5	Phillip	(laughs quietly)
6	Kate	any idea?
7	Phillip	n::o
8	Rach	xxx (sounds?) (sounds?)
9	Faisal	what what is that?
10	Kate	why are FROGS so happy?
11		(2.0)
12	Faisal	xxx what time?

13	Kate	no, just anytime (.)
14	Rach	[(jump?)]
15	Phillip	[(laughs)]
16	Kate	because because they eat what BUGS them (.)
17	Phillip	a::hh.
18	Rach	o::key,
19	Kate	because they EAT what BUGS them!
20	Phillip	yeah,
21	Faisal	they eat WHAT?
22	Kate	BUGS them
23	Faisal	b-bugs? What bugs?
24	Kate	bug (.) frogs eat bugs
25	Vely	but [now what do] they xxx
26	Faisal	[bugs oh bugs]
27	Kate	BUGS, b-u-g-s &
28	Faisal	& bugs?
29	Kate	yeah
30	Vely	but now what do they bug
31	Rach	what?
32	Vely	why?
33	Kate	why?
34	Vely	what? What? (.)
35	Rach	wh-what?&
36	Phillip	&what do they eat?
37	Vely	yes, what do they eat yes, you can say that, what do they eat

38	Kate	what do they eat.
39	Vely	yes
40	Kate	BUGS
41	Vely	bugs (laughs)
42	Rach	ahhh (whispery voice)
43	Phillip	yeah (in a soft voice)
44	Faisal	bu::gs.
45	Kate	but, but &
46	Vely	& it's funny,
47	Kate	yeah in in English if something BUGS you, it ANNOYS you
48	Vely	yes,
49	Kate	yeah.
50	??	(subdued laughter)
51	Kate	so it's a play on words (9.0)
52	Phillip	hmmnnn

Kate's attempt at humor via a funny riddle *why are frogs so happy* (line 1) started out on shaky grounds. Rachana's reaction in line 2 (*frog?)* indicates that she was confused by the question. She had to ask whether she heard 'frog' correctly or not. As a participant observer (line 4), the researcher laughed quietly (line 4). Phillip, in line 5, also reacted with laughter. It is ambiguous what his laughter meant, but since it occurred immediately after line 4, it could mean that he was starting to sense that laughter was the appropriate response. By line 10, Kate had delivered her supposed one-line riddle three times without successful uptake. Rachana did not seem to realize that Kate intended to make a joke, so she tried to answer the question in the literal sense (lines 8, 14). Faisal seemed unaware of the joking frame when he asked 'what time' in line 12 to which Kate answered 'just anytime' (line 13). Kate finally gave the punchline: 'because because they eat what bugs them' (line 19). There was no overt reaction from the group except for Phillip who responded with a weak 'yeah' (line 20). It became evident that the students did not know both meanings of the word 'bug' (as a noun referring to any small insects, and as a verb meaning 'to

annoy' or 'to irritate') which were important for the joke to work. As Pfordresher (1981, p.50) claims, "jokes, which need explanation before they are understood, are not funny. We should get the joke spontaneously, without help, either at once or after only a moment needed to see it. To take the joke apart seems inherently unpleasant."

The 'frog' riddle might be considered to have failed because it did not elicit the intended laughter. The 'failure' can be attributed to the students' linguistic constraints and the non-recognition of the joking scripts or playful frame. As Norrick (1993) points out, clearly signalling to the listeners whether or not we are joking or being serious determines the reaction that can be elicited. In the 'frog' example, the play frame was not established by the teacher so the students took the question 'why frogs are so happy' as a serious request for information. Furthermore, differences in signalling 'I am serious' and 'I am trying to be funny' will likely vary across cultures.

It has been argued that a failed attempt at humour can be humiliating for the teller (Bell, 2009, p. 1832). Thus, perhaps to lighten the awkward situation and reduce a sense of humiliation, Kate described her motivation for telling the joke:

53	Kate	I was in a class one time on languages and they said that
54		to understand the JOKES, in a LANGUAGE,
55	Phillip	Yeah
56	Kate	that means you're starting to erm to get a good handle on
57		because you can understand the jokes
58		(4.0)
59	Vely	sometimes why it's difficult people when people
60		they say something but you cannot understand
61		what they are saying and all people they LAUGH &
62	Rachana	& without knowing!
63	Vely	(laughs)
64	Kate	[yeah]
65	Vely	(still laughing) [it's terrible!]

In lines 53 to 54 and 56 to 57, Kate seemed to imply that the students did not have a 'good handle' on the language yet because they did not understand the joke. She hedged her comment by using 'they said' in line 53 thereby distancing herself from the utterance. Velyvet (lines 59 to 61), gave an indirect explanation of why the joke failed. He displayed face consideration by using 'people' and the third person pronoun 'they' which mitigated the utterance (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Indeed, the above extract gives an insight into the participants' attitudes and process of meaning making, as well as their mutual concern for each other's feelings.

Starting from line 66 in the next excerpt, students and teacher engage in a robust talk as they made sense of linguistic differences even amongst those who come from the same national cultures. Although lines 73 to 91 have been excluded for the sake of space limitations, one can still clearly get a flavor of the light-hearted nature of the 'off-task' talk.

66	Kate	for example if I were to talk to somebody
67		who just came from Newfoundland
68		which is a province in Canada,
69		I would have a very difficult time understanding
70		what they're saying
71		even though we're both speaking English
72		because they have different meanings
[...]		
91	Vely	Philipp in French? Not really!
92	Phillip	erm Quebec and France
93	Kate	their French is different!
94	Vely	they are close!
95	Phillip	yeah yeah yes yes
96		In Quebec, they kept the OLD, OLD French
97	Kate	Hmmm
98	Phillip	some they they have trouble when they go to France,
99	Kate	Okay
100	Phillip	yeah, Quebec people

101	Vely	Xxx
102	Phillip	yeah but when you say from HERE, from Ontario to&
103	Kate	& to here
104	Phillip	to BC? same accent? From Ontario to BC the same English, the same words?
105	Kate	erm (.), mostly yes,
106		the Maritimes are different because the Maritimes are much older
107	Phillip	Yes,
108	Kate	they've been settled longer and so I think they use erm well, I worked
109		with a couple of people (.)
110		from Newfoundland in in xxx when I was working in the North and,
111		they definitely have a very strong accent, they use different words for
112	Phillip	Hmmm
113	Kate	the same thing I mean they have been here a long time so they
114		their language is - has adjusted
115		has adjusted but even so they say things and I go 'you're not from here'
116	Phillip	(laughs)
117	Kate	xxx here (.) my my boss up there had been in Alberta
118		for fourTEEN years and still he would say some words
119	Phillip	yes,
120	Kate	and I would go you're not from here, because 'INTrest!'
121	SS	(laugh)
122	Kate	INTREST! (different accent)
123	Vely	Phillip?
124		Laughter
125	Kate	no no you're not from here and that's okay I mean I'm I'm sure they think
126		I talk funny. If I were to go there....they would go 'whatcha talkin'bout?'

The excerpts from line 66 to 126 show how the 'failed' joke generated a robust discussion on language related topics including culture and linguistic variation. It can be noted that the word 'here' which was used by Phillip in line 102, was used by Kate as a cohesive device over several utterances (lines 103, 113, 115 125). There was also a sense of explicitness in Kate's contributions: not only did she use personal examples, she dramatized her utterances with direct quotes (…and I go *you're not from here* in line 115*, I would go you're not from here* in line 120). This explicitness did not only help to prevent misunderstanding but also appeals to common ground (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and comity or the maintenance of friendly relations (Aston, 1993).

The discussion, after the 'frog joke', resonates with Aston's (1988; 1993) study of shop encounters. It was observed that customers and service assistants tended to engage in social talk when the sellers fail to provide the goods that the customers want. It is claimed that the friendly chat seemed to make the transactional failure more acceptable and perhaps less disappointing. The interaction that followed the failed joke can also be seen as a positive politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) aimed at redressing the face-threatening effect of the previous miscommunication. It can be argued that miscommunication can threaten both the speaker's and the hearer's face (Tzanne, 2000). The speaker might feel embarrassed for not having conveyed clearly their intention, and the listener might feel guilty for the misinterpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis in the previous section showed a case of misunderstanding when the teacher tried to tell a funny riddle. The misunderstanding, caused by the students' insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and joking frame in a Canadian context, then became a catalyst for a robust discussion on a related topic.

The miscommunication sequence analyzed in this article confirms the findings of many researchers (i.e. Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz, 2001; Lantolf & Genung, 2002; Scollon, 1999; Tannen, 1984; Gass & Varonis, 1991; Thomas, 1984; Varonis & Gass, 1985; Zamborlin, 2007) that differences of discourse convention often lead to misunderstanding. However, previous studies also fail to mention that miscommunication could be transformed into something positive (Victoria, 2012). Kate, the teacher, and the students sustained the interaction even after the misunderstanding was clarified. The lively discussion that followed can be viewed as having a 'celebratory' (Aston, 1993, p. 240) quality hearable as 'see, we're talking

and understanding each other.' In other words, miscommunication has led 'fruitful' results (Linell, 1995) making it possible for repair attempts to be seen as an expression of goodwill and concern (Coupland, Wiemann, & Giles, 1991).

Furthermore, in the case of Kate and her students', the fact that the joke failed to elicit laughter did not dilute its intended effect. The use of humor in interactions contributes to building rapport (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and creating team (Holmes & Marra, 2004). Noticeable in the extracts is the collaborative work among the speakers. This is consistent with the findings of other scholars (i.e. Firth, 2009; Georgieva, 2009; Mauranen, 2006; Meierkord, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2004) who observed that *lingua franca* interactions tend to be characterized by cooperation and collaboration.

Although the exchanges between speakers were characterized by confirmation requests, repetitions, elaborations, and explicitness than native speaker interactions (Varonis & Gass, 1985, p. 326), it can be argued that these are the very same repair mechanisms that generate the "potential to elaborate in productive ways and to build on the base of earlier failed attempts" (Coupland et al., 1991).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aims of this study were first, to describe how individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds negotiate (mis)communication; second, to explore how insights from a case of misunderstanding be used to gain knowledge about communication across cultures. It has been shown, unsurprisingly, that limited linguistic proficiency and lack of shared communication conventions make can make some speech events such as joke-telling susceptible to miscommunication. However, it was surprising to know, not only how the speakers handled collaboratively and willingly dealt with the misunderstanding, but also how they used the situation as a catalyst for further social interaction. The misunderstanding provided the students with 'real world' opportunities to practice their skills at negotiating meaning, asking for clarifications, checking for understanding, and collaborating with other interactants in doing repair work.

Miscommunication is perhaps inevitable in interactions where speakers use a language that is not their mother tongue. Therefore, an important implication of this study is for teachers and learners of a foreign language to re-evaluate their view of miscommunication. It is not something to be avoided at all costs; it can be mined for helpful insights not only on language learning and teaching but also on social relations. Arguably, the knowledge of identifying and giving solutions to miscommunication,

learning from such experience, striving to succeed, learning from other interactants, and setting things in order (Chiang, 2009, p.390) should go hand in hand with linguistic knowledge.

Transcription Conventions

(.)	a brief pause
(3.0)	number in parenthesis indicate timed pause in seconds
.	falling intonation at end of tone unit
?	high rising intonation at end of tone unit
,	slightly rising intonation at end of tone unit
!	animated intonation
-	unfinished utterance, e.g., false start, self-correction
??	unidentified speaker
WORD	Words written in capitals to indicate emphatic stress: e.g. VERY
xxx	unintelligible text
(word?)	guess at unclear text: e.g. I (apologize?) for the delay in shipment
::	noticeable lengthening of a vowel A: o::h, I'm sorry.
[words]	
[words]	simultaneous speech indicated in brackets: e.g. A: Did you [read the report] B: [didn't have] the time
&	latching, no perceptible pause after a turn A: I'm going to be late & B & me too
(laughs)	description of current action, transcribers' comments
[…]	deleted texts

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