

DANCING A WALTZ TO ROCK & ROLL MUSIC:  
RESOLVING CONFLICTING DISCOURSE EXPECTATIONS IN  
CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION

NOEL HOUCK

SUSAN GASS

*Temple University, Tokyo*

*Michigan State University,  
East Lansing*

The conduct of interaction from moment to moment involves such a delicate balance of cooperation among the interactional partners that inadequately social action by one of the partners throws the other partners off. Behaviorally it looks and sounds then as if the partners were stumbling over one another, as in a moment of clumsiness during the course of a ballroom dance. Conversational hesitations and false starts occur as the smooth trajectory of conversation is momentarily disrupted. Then forward motion is reestablished and the conversation continues (Erickson – Shultz 1982: 70).

1. Introduction

In this paper we consider cross-cultural data with an eye to understanding how what Erickson and Shultz (1982) refer to as “uncomfortable moments” are recognized, dealt with, and potentially resolved. Uncomfortable moments occur in interactions when something “goes awry”. They are associated with particular linguistic and nonverbal behaviors, notably posture shifts and recognizable rhythmic instability in the interaction. In their analysis of counseling interviews with native speaker (NS) of English counselors and students, Erickson and Shultz argue that an uncomfortable moment is “a unit of interaction that [can] be identified in valid and reliable ways” (1982: 104). In an extension of Erickson and Shultz’s work, Fiksdal (1990) identified uncomfortable moments in cross-cultural counseling interviews with NS counselors and NNS students. Her analysis revealed that, unlike NSs, NNSs

do not always shift position during an uncomfortable moment, but provide other indications of the existence of a problem.

In reporting on such a moment, we will avoid terms such as *pragmatic failure* or *communicative incompetence* since they imply some sort of inadequacy, usually on the part of the non-native speaker (NNS). In reality, as Gumperz (1982) has pointed out, each interactant comes to a conversation with certain expectations as to how that conversation should unfold; in cross-cultural communication both participants are frequently "inadequate" in the ways of the system of their interlocutor. Thus, what we are dealing with in cross-cultural interactions is often a matter of asymmetrical expectations. This can be particularly problematic at the level of discourse, where subtle framing issues are at work. Asymmetrical expectations can lead to asynchronous interactions (see Fiksdal 1990), which are often characterized as communication breakdowns, communication difficulties, miscommunications, or even dysfunctional communicative outcomes.

## 2. The data

The data we will report on comprise one segment from on-going research on disagreement and miscommunication in cross-cultural interactions. The data consist of conversations by pairs of graduate students in an American university in Japan. The pair that we focus on in this paper consists of two women, one a native speaker (NS) of Japanese and the other a NS of English. The discussion was in English.

Both participants were enrolled in a course on second language acquisition, one of the last courses needed to complete their two-year degree program. In the data of concern to this study, the participants were involved in an open task (similar to others they had done in pairs or groups previously in the course), in which they had to evaluate and discuss concepts dealt with during the course. This particular task (adapted from a task developed by Rod Ellis, personal communication) required participants to evaluate Bley-Vroman's (1987) statements regarding the applicability of 10 characteristics to second language (L2) acquisition, first language (L1) acquisition and/or general skill learning. Participants were instructed to consider each characteristic and determine to which of these three categories it applied. The data were collected toward the end of the semester in sessions that were video- and audiotaped. Participants were offered class credit for participating in the study.

For this analysis, we have isolated one segment which illustrates the development and resolution of an uncomfortable moment, looking at it from the perspective of the NNS of English. We will not deal with the role of the NS in resolving the uncertainties that arise. We will characterize the episode, provide

an account of the uncomfortable moment, and describe the resolution, which reflects in part the actions taken by the NNS.

As mentioned earlier, the participants were a NS of Japanese and a NS of English interacting in English. The native Japanese speaker was in her mid 20s and was relatively fluent in English with a two-year old TOEFL score of 600. Both as a child and as an adult she had had considerable experience living in other countries, including a total of seven years in the U.S. The NS of English was in her late 30s and had also had considerable experience living in other cultures, including France, Israel, and Japan, where, at the time of data collection, she had been residing for nine years.

The interpretation presented here relies on close scrutiny of the data by the researchers; a retrospective interview with the NNS participant, who viewed the tape and commented on the interaction; and observations by NSs of Japanese who viewed the tape.

## 3. The uncomfortable moment

The episode that we will focus on comes at the very beginning of the conversation. The researcher has just left the room, and the NS of English starts with the utterance in Example (1) (See appendix for transcription conventions).

(1) NS: okay so we're just gonna give our opinions about these, uhm do you have an overall opinion?

The NNS responds by repeating:

NNS: do I have a overall (one)? uhm

At this point there is a longish pause accompanied by a movement of the NNS's head, with her gaze shifting from the task sheet in front of her to her interlocutor. This movement culminates with a big smile, which she described in retrospective comments as sarcastic. The volume of her voice is low in comparison with the volume in later portions of this episode. The NNS's response represents an uncomfortable moment, as evidenced by her pause, her repetition of the NS's previous utterance with rising intonation, her lowered volume, her unexpected body movement (posture shift, gaze, and facial expression), and her hesitation marker *uhm*.

The non-smooth flowing nature of this opening was remarked on by other NSs of Japanese who viewed the videotape and by the NNS herself, who, after watching the taped interaction, stated that she was not certain what the NS was getting at with her question, and that this generalized confusion was the source of her question and nonverbal reaction. What is particularly interesting is that looking at the form of the discourse, one could also analyze the NNS's repetition

("do I have an overall (one)?)") as a "language" problem, where, for example, the NNS did not know the meaning of the word *overall*. In fact, much of the work within the input/interaction paradigm (see Long 1980, 1981, 1983, 1996; Gass 1997) in the field of second language acquisition would come to precisely that conclusion. However, if one takes a more global look at the situation, including the NNS's linguistic background and proficiency, her retrospective comments, and her performance in other parts of the discourse, one can easily become convinced that the problem is a global discourse one and not a local linguistic one.

#### 4. An account of the uncomfortable moment

Why should such a simple opening pose difficulties to a high proficiency NNS of English? On the face of it, the NS's opening remark and question seem innocuous enough, but perhaps that is because we are looking at it from an English discourse perspective. Watanabe (1993) sheds some light on this particular issue. Her research examines NS discourse in groups of Americans and Japanese. Her data base, comparable to ours, consists of an open task in which groups of same language speakers respond to open-ended questions such as "Why did you decide to learn Japanese" or "Why did you decide to study abroad?" Watanabe identified linguistic features in her data which she determined to be signaling framing differences between the two groups. The observations relevant to this paper involve conversational openings.

According to Watanabe, the main difference between the openings of the Japanese groups and those of the American groups was the time required to "get into" the heart of the discussion. For the Americans, *okay* was a common opener, after which they launched right in, much as our English NS (American) when she said "okay so we're just gonna give our opinions about these uhm do you have an overall opinion?" An example from one of Watanabe's American openings is given in (2) (Watanabe 1993: 182).

- (2) Beth: Okay::=  
 Mike: =So, Beth why did you decide to learn Japanese?  
 Sean: [ Why

The Japanese, on the other hand, focused more on procedures for conducting their discussion. For example, the Japanese talked about the order of turns and how they would go about discussing the various topics. The following example is a translation of a typical Japanese negotiation at the beginning of a session (Watanabe 1993: 184-185).

- (3) Yasuo: Let's see as you see, uhm, basically we'll follow the number=  
 Keiko: That's right. Number one, number two, and number=  
 =[  
 Fumiko: H=h=h=h  
 Keiko: =three.  
 Yasuo: Hm. It's easy to get in.=  
 Keiko: =That's right. Then ... well, the top one, each one of us has to talk in turn, I wonder=  
 Fumiko: =That is so.=  
 Yasuo: =That's right ... following numbers, how are we going to do ...  
 Ikuo: Ladies first.=  
 Fumiko: =Please=  
 Yasuo: =Oh, that sounds good.=  
 Fumiko: [laugh]  
 =[  
 Keiko: [laugh]  
 Keiko: Then, from the younger one. [laugh]  
 Fumiko: [ Please [laugh]  
 Fumiko: No, no. Big sister. [laugh]  
 Keiko: What?  
 Ikuo: It doesn't matter, does it.  
 Keiko: As you see, [Keiko takes turn]

Thus, we are claiming from the evidence of the data, as well as comments by the Japanese participant and other Japanese viewers, that an uncomfortable moment occurred at the beginning of the discourse, specifically, that the NS's opening (*okay*, followed soon thereafter by a question) caused the NNS to lose her "conversational footing", inasmuch as it was unexpected, given her own discourse framework.

#### 5. Resolution

Following Erickson and Shultz's (1982) analogy to ballroom dancing, the NNS "regains her balance" shortly into the conversation. Actions taken by the NNS were observable in the data and were identified by the Japanese observers of the videotape and noted by the NNS herself during her retrospective viewing of the interaction. In the discussion of (4), we illustrate some of these actions.

- (4) (Note: The NNS's gaze is on the task sheet unless otherwise noted.)

- 1 NS: okay so we're just gonna give our opinions about these, uhm do you have an overall opinion?

- 2 NNS: do I have a overall (one)? uhm (4.0)  
 ((HEAD DOWN, UP SMILE))
- 3 NS: I have an overall opinion that most of them are going to be general skill learning?  
 ((POINTS TO PAPER—————))
- 4 NNS: [ aha
- 5 NS: general skill learning? uhm (4.0) number 8 and 9,  
 ((POINTS TO PAPER—  
 [
- 5' NNS: ((MOVES CLOSER ARM UP))
- 6 NNS: aha
- 7 NS: definitely I think are related to L2 acquisition.  
 ((POINTING TO PAPER—————))
- 7' NNS: ((HEAD TURNS SLIGHTLY AS EYES SCAN PAPER))
- 8 NNS: and uh general learning- skill learning?  
 ((PICKS UP PENCIL; HOLDS OVER TASK SHEET))
- 9 NS: ((NODS)) and general. but they can go in this category too.  
 do you agree?  
 [
- 10 NNS: oh really?
- 11 okay, uhm ( ) I don't underst- well I agree that im- importance of  
 ((POINTS TO PAPER))  
 of instruction and the importance of negative evidence.

The NNS's behavior in this segment seems oriented first toward figuring out what is going on and then toward taking some control of the interaction. It takes the form of the following four moves:

- a. Appeal for Assistance
- b. Attempts to Establish a Foothold in the Conversation
- c. Entry into the Discussion
- d. Continued Active Participation in the Discussion

The NNS responds to the confusing question in line 1 with a repair initiation, realized in line 2 of the data by repetition of the NS's question with rising intonation and lowered voice; then a pause, during which she slowly raises her

gaze, with a smile; and then the hesitation marker *uhm*. In a retrospective interview, the NNS noted that her response coincided with an expectation that the NS would explain more.

The NS's response to this "appeal" is an elaboration of her own version of a response to the question that she posed in line 1. During this response (lines 3-5), the NNS attends with two turn passes (*aha*'s), after each of which the NS continues talking.

The NNS next attempts to establish a foothold in the conversation. Her shift from a more passive state to more active involvement is signaled through shifts in posture and physical orientation (In line 5', the NNS straightens up and moves closer to the task sheet [and to the NS]) and eye movement across the task sheet (line 7'). In her follow-up interview, the NNS claimed that at this point she was half listening and half scanning the task sheet to get some idea of how she wanted to get into the conversation.

The NNS effects active entry into the discussion with her addition, with rising intonation (line 8), to the NS's utterance in line 7. At the same time, she picks up a pencil and positions it over the task sheet, where it remains.

She continues in line 11, with a "really?" whose counterpart in Japanese (*honto?*) NSs of Japanese have indicated often functions as a signal that the speaker is getting ready to express his/her ideas. The NNS's "really?" overlaps the NS's eliciting "do you agree?" simultaneously indicating the beginning of a response to the overlapped question. This overlap goes on to develop as a rather involved expression of disagreement. The NNS later noted that in line 10 she latched onto an aspect of the NS's comments on which she had a definite opinion which she wanted to express.

From this point, the NNS continued to participate actively in the discussion. Before completing the disagreement, her fluency increased, her gaze became more regularly engaged with that of the NS, her volume rose, and she began gesturing. She later commented that when she begins to gesture, she knows that she is feeling comfortable in English, as she does not gesture in Japanese.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have described an episode of cross-cultural communication containing an uncomfortable moment in a NS-NNS academic discussion. In this case, the disruption was occasioned by a difference in discourse expectations, resulting in linguistic manifestations that resemble what we refer to as "tripping over one's linguistic feet".

Of equal interest is our observation that the NNS's actions seem to work to remedy the problem. They work not because she figures out what the NS intended, and not because she quickly relinquishes a desire to organize the interaction before proceeding (as she makes what could be interpreted as an abor-

tive attempt to set up discussion procedures later in the interaction), but because both she and the NS work to establish an interaction in which they function as co-participants.

As Coupland, Wiemann, and Giles (1991: 8), citing Brown and Rogers (1991), state: "successful relationships demand neither harmony nor discord, but rather the resources to manage both polarities. From this perspective, "mis-communicative" sequences in relationships are not in themselves failures, but an intrinsic part of the cycle of creating a 'working consensus'." This analysis provides a look at how miscommunication at a discourse level may be recognized and managed across cultures.

## REFERENCES

- Bley-Vroman, Robert  
1987 "The fundamental character of foreign language learning", in: William Rutherford – Michael Sharwood Smith (eds.), 19-30.
- Brown, Julie – L. Edna Rogers  
1991 "Openness, uncertainty and intimacy: An epistemological reformulation", in: Nicholas Coupland – Howard Giles – John Wiemann (eds.), 146-165.
- Coupland, Nicholas – John Wiemann – Howard Giles  
1991 "Talk as 'problem' and communication as 'miscommunication': An integrative analysis", in: Nicholas Coupland – Howard Giles – John Wiemann (eds.), 1-17.
- Coupland, Nicholas – Howard Giles – John Wiemann (eds.)  
1991 "Miscommunication" and problematic talk. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Erickson, Fredrick – Jeffrey Shultz  
1982 *The counselor as gatekeeper: Social interaction in interviews*. New York: Academic Press.
- Fiksdal, Susan  
1990 *The right time and pace: A microanalysis of cross-cultural gatekeeping interviews*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Gass, Susan  
1997 *Input, interaction, and the second language learner*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gumperz, John  
1982 *Discourse strategies*. New York: CUP.
- Long, Michael  
1980 Input, interaction, and second language acquisition. [Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.]  
1981 "Input, interaction, and second language acquisition", in: Harris Winitz (ed.), 259-278.  
1983 "Linguistic and conversational adjustments to non-native speakers", *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 5: 177-193.  
1996 "The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition", in: William Ritchie – Tej Bhatia (eds.), 413-468.
- Ritchie, William – Tej Bhatia (eds.)  
1996 *Handbook of second language acquisition*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Rutherford, William – Michael Sharwood Smith (eds.)  
1987 *Grammar and second language teaching*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Tannen, Deborah (ed.)

1993 *Framing in discourse*. New York: OUP.

Watanabe, Suwako

1993 "Cultural differences in framing: American and Japanese group discussions", in: Deborah Tannen (ed.), 176-209.

Winitz, Harris (ed.)

1981 *Native language and foreign language acquisition*. (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 379.) New York: New York Academy of Sciences.

## APPENDIX

### *Houck-Gass Transcription Conventions*

- I. Intonation/Punctuation Utterances do not begin with capital letters (we have retained Watanabe's line-initial capitals); normal punctuation conventions are not followed; instead, intonation (usually at the end of a clause or a phrase) is indicated as follows:

At the end of a word, phrase, or clause

? Rising Intonation

. Falling Intonation

, "Nonfinal Intonation" (usually a slight rise)

No punctuation at clause end indicates transcriber uncertainty

- II. Nonverbal Behavior

((SMILE)) capitals within double parentheses indicate nonlinguistic occurrences such as gestures, smiles, and nods that are relevant to the analysis

((SMILE—)) refers to a nonlinguistic occurrence accompanying speech, with hyphens indicating that the behavior continues

- III. Other

( ? ) or ( ) incomprehensible word or phrase

(all right) a word or phrase within parentheses indicates that the transcriber is not certain that s/he has heard the word or phrase correctly

[ indicates overlapping speech; it begins at the point at which the overlap occurs

= means that the utterance on one line continues without pause where the next = sign picks it up (latches)

y- a hyphen after an initial sound indicates a false start

Ex: y- your mother is coming right?

(1.0) numbers within parentheses indicate length of pause in seconds