

MEANING AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT:
NOTES ON THE PRAGMATICS OF CROSS-LINGUISTIC AND
CROSS-CULTURAL INTELLIGIBILITY

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1. Introduction

In a paper considering the theoretical foundations of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic understanding, Sajavaara (1988) notes the importance of interaction-based studies for developing our understanding of the ways in which meaning is recovered across linguistic and cultural barriers. He argues for a global, holistic, and context-specific view of the recovery of meaning, which goes beyond the information content of messages and takes into account affective and interpersonal factors as well as the complex and dynamic processes of negotiating and adjusting interpretations in a real-time speech setting. In this paper I will consider how a pragmatic perspective on language and interaction can shed light on processes of creating meaningful discourse in intercultural or international settings. Building on the social and interactional dimension of pragmatics, I examine how sociocultural features of settings and the real-time context of interaction bear relevance to the processes through which speakers whose linguistic and sociocultural background are not shared participate in and make sense of some communicative tasks and activities.

2. Cross-cultural/cross-linguistic intelligibility and interactional asymmetry

One feature of cross-linguistic or cross-cultural intelligibility which is particularly interesting from a pragmatic perspective is interactional asymmetry, in other words different and potentially unequal patterns of participating in and managing interaction in this type of communication (Hutchby 1996; Linell – Luckman 1991). Research on second language acquisition and intercultural or

international communication has drawn attention to various forms of asymmetry which arise in situations where participants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds come into contact. Different and/or unequal access to knowledge and resources, e.g., those related to linguistic and sociocultural aspects of communicative settings, has been linked to problems of understanding and participation rights, and hence relations of dominance or power.

Problems of this type have been studied extensively in different areas of research. Studies in contrastive and interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Kasper – Blum-Kulka 1993) have sought to identify how language and culture-specific patterns of linguistic action and limited command of the pragmatics aspects of communication may lead to misunderstandings or inappropriate language use. Work in interactional sociolinguistics and intercultural pragmatics, on the other hand, has shown that subtle differences in linguistic and other cues through which participants signal their understanding often give rise to observable interactional trouble (e.g., Gumperz 1992; Roberts – Davies – Jupp 1993). Further, discourse pragmatic research has focused on problematic aspects of conversation management and interpersonal relations, e.g., discrepancies in turn-management, sequential aspects of action and topic management (e.g., Clyne – Ball – Neil 1991; Scollon – Scollon 1991). Finally, interaction-oriented studies in second language acquisition research have drawn attention to the “modified” nature of interaction involving non-native speakers, investigating links between the type and amount of interactional modifications (e.g., meaning negotiations) and the process of language acquisition (see e.g., Wesche 1994).

Recent work in these fields has drawn attention to the complexities involved in negotiating meaning in an interactional context in at least two important ways. First, it has emphasised the variability of language use in relation to a number of contextual factors. Participants’ performance and communicative success or failure have been linked to such features of social context as language proficiency, culture-specific communicative style, knowledge of topic, content expertise or familiarity with task (see e.g., Zuengler 1993). Secondly, studies have documented discrepancies at different levels of discourse organisation ranging from patterns of turn-taking (e.g., Kasper 1989; Wieland 1991) and the organisation of action sequences (Bardovi-Harlig – Hartford 1990; Kasper 1989) to phases of speech events and management of conversational topics (Scollon – Scollon 1991).

However, discrepancies encountered in actual communication cannot always be explained by cultural, linguistic and social differences between participants. Recent studies of bilingual or multilingual interaction (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1997; Auer 1998) and international communication in a variety of settings (e.g., Firth 1996) have shown that speakers with different linguistic repertoires routinely engage in meaningful and orderly interaction using a variety of context-specific

resources. These resources include displays of asymmetry of linguistic or sociocultural knowledge and ethnic or cultural identity. Participants may, for example, make explicit differences in linguistic or cultural background in order to update mutual understanding, to appeal for assistance, or to create involvement and thus maintain or readjust their mutual alignment with respect to the current activity and each other’s position (Aston 1993). Similarly, they may seek to overcome trouble or incongruities in discourse organisation by drawing on some aspect of shared background and specific resources available in the context (Fiksdal 1990; Shea 1994).

In this line of work focus of analysis has shifted from externally imposed contextual asymmetry to the role of locally occasioned asymmetries of knowledge, expertise and resources in the situated construction of discourse (see also Linell – Luckman 1991; Drew 1991). It is this perspective that serves as the starting point of the following observations.

3. Some observations on displays of asymmetry

As noted above, asymmetry here covers a range of phenomena which somehow make explicit unshared knowledge, expertise or resources in the interaction process and which are intertwined with patterns of participation and management of discourse. Below I will make some observations on actual occurrences of such phenomena on the basis of data in conversational and institutional settings. I will focus on two types of asymmetry: orientation to linguistic resources and orientation to knowledge and expertise with respect to topic or the social setting. I will consider how such asymmetries arise as part of the participants’ management of communicative activities and how they may be relevant to the negotiation of understanding, participation in discourse and speakers’ identities and relationships. The data come from a corpus of interactions recorded in institutional and informal conversational settings.

3.1. Orientation to linguistic resources

The examples below illustrate how participants who are using a foreign language for managing a shared activity or task make explicit some of the unshared aspects of their resources, and yet, may treat them as a non-problematic, normal part of the interaction process.

Examples (1) and (2) come from an informal conversation between a dating couple, a young man whose first language is German and a young woman whose first language is Finnish. The couple use English as the language of everyday communication. These examples show how participants explicitly display their different linguistic backgrounds and treat it as a normal, regular feature of their communication. In fact, it could be argued that the joint and explicit

orientation to language serves as a resource through which the participants construct involvement and negotiate a shared perspective on the activity that they are engaged in, and thus constitute the specific, rather intimate context of their relationship.

The excerpt examined below comes from a conversation which took place as the couple were preparing dinner. At this point of the conversation they are talking about buying a birthday present for a female friend of P's. P's boyfriend K suggests that she should get her a ticket to the cinema.

- (1)
- K: I would (.) give her a free ticket (..) for elokuva (movie) and a drink in jyväskylä so she has to visit you
P: not a bad idea (.) mm
—
K: now okay (...) let's see yeah but you have to do it like that (.) why not (.) it's a good present
P: yeah
→ K: so she has to visit you here (..) you can go to elokuva (.) or elokuvIIN (movie, to the movies)
P: mm (.) that's it
K: to cinema (.) yeah (.) and then (.) for a drink

In the beginning of this excerpt K suggests to his girlfriend that she should buy her friend a ticket to the cinema. In formulating his suggestion, K uses the Finnish noun for 'cinema' *elokuva* twice: first in its basic form and then, following Pia's acknowledgement of the suggestion and a repetition of the base form *elokuva*, in its morphologically correct form to fit the syntactic structure of a corresponding Finnish utterance (*elokuvIIN*; 'go TO the movies'). Interactionally, the morphologically modified version of the noun is produced as a self-repair through which K reformulates his suggestion drawing from his knowledge of English and his partial knowledge of Finnish. What emerges is an interesting design of the activity in which English and Finnish syntax are intertwined. It seems that by switching into Finnish and by orienting to linguistic form, the speaker both makes explicit the multilingual resources available in this interaction and his own identity as non-native speaker of both English and Finnish. In the context of negotiating a shared topic, he seems to treat the interaction as an opportunity to display, and possibly also learn, Finnish.

Example (2) below comes from the same conversation and shows a similar pattern in which the multilingual resources used in communication between these two people become relevant. In this case P is talking about two of her Finnish friends.

- (2) P: Päivi doesn't like/ to be here in restaurants we were here with
→ Virtasen Sanna but she doesn't want to be
K: why not
→ P: no idea (..) keine ahnung

In the second line (marked with an arrow) P gives the name of one of her friends. The way she does this is interesting: she names her friend in a specifically Finnish way, giving the person's family name before her first name and using the correct case form (the genitive case) of the family name. She is thus not only making explicit her own expert knowledge of Finnish, but also treating her recipient as someone who has or can be expected to have access to the same knowledge. This linguistic detail is embedded in a message formed in the participants' shared "lingua franca", English. In her final turn P again makes explicit the linguistically variable context: she draws from another set of resources by answering K's question (why?) first in English and then repeats her answer in German, K's first language.

In this conversation the participants routinely make explicit their different linguistic backgrounds and their orientation to each other's resources by integrating elements from three languages. Asymmetries in linguistic resources thus become an integral part of turn-design: the choice of lexical items from different languages causes modifications in the morphology and syntax of utterances, thus structuring the turn in specific ways. They also affect sequential structure by occasioning exchanges where the participants may orient to the linguistic items used rather than the activity in progress. The examples above show how turns and utterances are carefully designed for this particular context. Even though the participants are using items from different languages and communicating in a language which is not the first language of either of them, they show detailed and shared understanding or rather complex aspects of the social context. By drawing on their (partially) shared resources of English, their own expert knowledge of their first language, and their knowledge of each other's first language, they display their shared identity as non-native speakers of English, their orientation and attentiveness to each others' linguistic knowledge, and also their relationship based on some degree of intimacy.

From a pragmatic perspective, it might be said that the two participants appear to be using asymmetries in their linguistic background as a means to engage in constructing involvement or comity (Aston 1993) and thus orienting to a symmetrical relationship of intimacy. Local asymmetries thus here not only function as a condition and constraint on the interaction, but are also used as a resource through which the participants occasion and negotiate the specific social context in which they are in.

3.2. Orientation to knowledge and expertise in institutional settings

The following example illustrates how asymmetries of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge come to play in the context of institutional interaction. Example (3) shows how the negotiation of meaning and management of interaction is shaped by institutional features of discourse and how the participants orient to knowledge and expertise required in such contexts as part of the process of creating meaningful interaction.

Example (3) draws attention to ways in which displays of asymmetry may be used to adjust the current interactive context. The example is drawn from a study advice session between a Finnish student advisor (A) responsible for dealing with foreign students and an exchange student (S) from Greece. The student in this case is asking a question about student discounts at the railway station.

- (3) S: ask you on behalf of my friend
 A: yes?
 S: eeh eeh because she's not able to come right now
 A: yeah
 S: and (.) /we're
 → A: / is she/ studying here at (xx)
 S: yes /she's studies
 A: /okay
 S: one girl from Bangladesh
 → A: Bangladesh? /yes eeh El Ella Rulalaila
 S: / yeah (.) (xxxx) / yes (..)
 A: yes?
 S: eeh eeh and we are taking with (mar) courses management a trip a trip to helsinki=
 A: = yes
 S: and eeh we are taking the train so eeh I would like to ask you eeh now that we have our student card do we need to go to the eeh=
 → A: =railway station (.) ouh
 S: yes with eeh an extra photograph for?
 A: no no if you have the student card it's enough you'll get the discount with the card (.) you just go there to the ticket office and give the card
 S: aah
 A: to the person (.) there and (.) they give you the discount

In the first lines in the example, the student (S) seems to specify that the purpose of her calling on the advisor is to clarify some question on behalf of a friend. The advisor's turns show that she infers from this that the problem or question has something to do with this friend: she initiates an insertion sequence which serves to establish the identity of the friend in question. The advisor's contributions (the question "is she studying here") and subsequent offer of assistance ("Bangladesh? eeh ...") are quick, overlapping or immediately following the student's previous turns. These turns show the advisor's orientation to the institutional context: she takes an active and explicit role in trying to clarify what the question anticipated by the student is about and draws inferences about the student's turns on the basis of her understanding of the institutional activity (solving students' problems). The advisor's position of expertise becomes even clearer when the student's question is formulated: while the student initiates the question, her hesitation is taken by the advisor as an indicator of trouble with finding the right word, and the advisor quickly offers the missing word (*railway station*) thus completing the question.

The example shows how meanings and the participants' interactional strategies in this encounter are intertwined with the institutional task. The advisor is a representative of the university administration, and is offering consultation to foreign students on a regular basis. Her primary objective here seems to be to get through the task; to elicit the question or problem which is the reason for the student's visit and to respond to it in a helpful and efficient way. The advisor's routine way of offering assistance and moving on once the problem or question has become sufficiently clear, shows both close monitoring of the local micro-level cues of interaction and context-specific orientation to her social identity as an institutional representative (see Drew – Heritage 1992 for similar findings on institutional interaction between native speakers). While she attends to trouble associated with language (e.g., the student's search for a correct word), her main focus is on finding a solution to the task. For this reason, any problem with language or shared understanding is only made relevant when it interferes with the task itself.

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have briefly examined how close analysis of language and interaction from a pragmatic perspective can contribute to the interdisciplinary effort of investigating how meanings and interpretations are negotiated across linguistic and cultural borders. Even short fragments of interaction, such as those referred to above, show the intricate ways in which participants draw from multiple cues and complex sets of linguistic and sociocultural resources in their efforts to achieve a shared understanding of the activity in focus. While

pragmatic analysis of this type does not extend to explaining the sociocognitive process of creating understanding, it offers a useful perspective for analysing how the participants monitor interaction in a social context and how they display and negotiate meanings, identities and social activities in context-specific ways.

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