

Language, Culture and Miscommunication

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Introduction

The large-scale human migrations that accompanied the economic upheavals of the last few decades brought about radical changes in the metropolitan environments where most of us live. These changes not only have important consequences for the way we view the “Other,” but they also significantly affect the social relations on which we depend in the conduct of our everyday affairs. Imagine you were standing on a public sidewalk in the center of a large city either in the United States or western Europe observing the surrounding scene. You will agree that the diversity in human types, clothing styles and modes of behavior you will encounter as well as the diversity of goods for sale in the surrounding shops is quite unprecedented in comparison to what the same area might have looked like a few decades ago. Populations that in the past were separated by distances of thousands of miles, known to each other only through travelers’ accounts, people differing not only in language but in ways of viewing the world established and reinforced through centuries of historically separate experiences, now live side by side and intermingle in the same urban settings.

Culture and Cultural Difference

In attempting to explain the long term coexistence of radically distinct religious ideologies, patterns of family, friendship and peer group relations, attitudes to work and leisure and the differences in ways of speaking that reflect them, the term that comes most readily to mind is “cultural difference.” It seems at first glance as if formerly homogeneous European-based societies were well on their way to being transformed into systems more like the multi-cultural societies known from anthropological descriptions of Caribbean or Southeast Asian societies. Indeed culture in today’s social ecologies is no longer the sole province of anthropologists studying geographically-bounded, isolated and distant peoples. Specialists in corporate affairs and corporate mergers list culture among the possible impediments to change. Educational researchers speak of classroom cultures in characterizing what is distinctive about urban classroom. Terms like youth culture regularly appear in developmental studies and mass media accounts. Culture has become an important concern for scientists and laypersons alike.

What then is the significance of the term? The term “cultural difference” is a good metaphor to capture what we observe. Are the phenomena we seek to explain in studies of urban society really the same as those studied by our anthropological predecessors? Is there a clear definition that will account for the range of phenomena that we refer to as cultural? The term has been in common use ever since the mid-nineteenth century but, unlike notions of social structure, social organization or kinship, which do have relatively unambiguous definitions, anthropologists have tended to use culture as a loosely defined notion designed to capture what is distinctive about the beliefs, values and modes of action encountered in field work. In earlier days the focus on culture helped to promulgate a holistic, and at the same time person-centered approach to the geographically isolated and technologically simple face-to-face societies, which most anthropologists tended to study. It is only in the last few decades, however, that definitions have been attempted which seek, to use Clifford Geertz’ well-known words, “to cut the term down to size.” In the process, the meaning of culture has been narrowed, at least in the technical literature, from connoting the totality of human artifacts, beliefs and customs, to referring to the underlying knowledge and values that guide our expressed beliefs and ideologies. Culture, in other words, increasingly refers to the often unstated and subconsciously held premises that guide action, not just to what we actually do. Yet, even with such redefinitions, difficulties still arise once we try to understand what cultural diversity in modern urban environments means.

What is it that motivates our concern with cultural difference? Is it simply the long term co-existence of distinct systems of beliefs and values over time within the same social setting, or is there something else that needs explaining? We argue that it is not cultural difference as such but rather what that difference communicates in the context of our everyday lives that is important. For instance how do changes in the environments in which we live impact our ability to carry on our daily affairs? When we look at difference in this way, we note some important contrasts between our current situation, and the multicultural urban situations referred to above. In the latter case, ethnically and culturally distinct populations tended to settle in geographically bounded neighborhoods where they were able to recreate local infrastructures that reflected their own values and ways of acting and that mediated their relations with the surrounding world. In recent post-modern societies this has become more and more difficult. People must now deal with bureaucratic institutions as individuals. Their actions are assessed in terms of universal standards which supposedly apply equally to all, as Max Weber and more recently Erving Goffman (1983) tell us. We would argue that it is problems that arise in this connection and the role that differences in cultural and communicative background play in everyday interaction that lead to much of what we refer to as cultural diversity. The best way to illustrate this point is through concrete examples from specific case studies. In the rest of this paper we argue that in-depth discourse analysis of selected extracts from everyday talk can significantly sharpen our understanding of how cultural difference works. But first, a bit more background.

Culture in Communicative Practice

What comes to mind first in connection with communication and culture are Benjamin Lee Whorf's famous studies of linguistic relativity and the many discussions of language and culture that his work continues to provoke. We can look at Whorf's work from two perspectives. On the one hand, there are his own, and his teacher Edward Sapir's programmatic writings on how language enters into the way in which we define our social universe and determines our actions. On the other hand, there are the vivid empirical examples of culturally and linguistically determined differences in lexical and grammatical systems that Whorf provides. These latter studies, which have led to similar studies in many languages and in many regions of the world, do indeed exemplify significant distinctions in the ways in which people use language to categorize, and thereby highlight certain features of the environment while backgrounding others. In their recent reexamination of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic and cultural relativity, Gumperz and Levinson argue that the basic issue is best described as "how language through culture affects the way we think" (1996).

To the extent that linguistic categorization reflects cultural codes, these codes must be treated as historically created, conventional ways of referring that do not necessarily determine what people do or think at any one time. For example, we may tell someone that two days have passed since we last saw them. But I doubt whether we would think of "days" as discrete entities like cars or trains. To show how language can affect thought and lead to action we need to take a different perspective on communication, a perspective that distinguishes between grammatical and semantic structures and the historical knowledge they encapsulate on the one hand, and broader communicative processes that have special metaphoric significance in evoking contexts and constructing social personae, on the other.

To do this, we begin from a position which assumes that communication in face-to-face encounters can be seen as constituted by interactive exchanges of moves and countermoves involving speakers and listeners who actively cooperate in the joint production of meaningful interaction. What is conveyed at any point in such an exchange is significantly affected by preceding talk, and in turn constrains what can follow. One cannot therefore assume, as lay persons as well as linguists concerned with text analysis tend to do, that communicating is simply a matter of individuals transforming their ideas into signs by means of a culturally acquired code. Instead we concentrate on participants' own context-bound, situated, on-line processing of information, in which nonverbal communication also plays a significant role (Kendon 1989).

In inferring what they hear, listeners focus not only on the propositional content of messages but on what a speaker intends to communicate, as speech act theorists have already told us (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Grice 1989). Empirical

research on discourse and conversation over the last decade provides ample evidence to document this position. It has become clear in the course of this work that interpretations rely not on meaning and grammar alone but also on perceptions of extralinguistic context, knowledge of the world, as well as on the cultural presuppositions that are brought to the interaction (Atkinson and Heritage 1985). So far, however, researchers have been concerned with specifying what such implicit knowledge is, not on how this knowledge is directly reflected in the overt lexical content of messages or how it enters into interpretation. The question of how and by what cognitive processes such knowledge is retrieved in the act of conversing and how it affects conversationalists' interpretation of what is intended has only begun to receive systematic attention.

Erving Goffman's notion of frame offers a useful point of departure for the present discussion. In his highly suggestive treatment of interactive exchanges, Goffman argues that the principles that guide action in any one encounter are hierarchically nested in terms of levels of generality operating at various degrees of remove from the situation at hand with each level acting like a membrane to filter out certain considerations while highlighting others (Goffman 1974). Culture thus can be seen as in large part communicated through talk. But Goffman did not attempt to present an explicit theoretical framework for empirical work.

Analytical procedures developed and described in previous work at Berkeley (Gumperz 1981, 1982) draw on the concepts of speech event, activity type and sequential organization, but focus primarily on the notions of conversational inference and contextualization conventions. Conversational inference is defined as the situated, context-bound process of interpretation through which participants in an exchange assess other participants' communicative intentions and on which they base their own responses. Everyday conversational interpretations are automatically produced, and their underlying mechanisms are not readily subject to conscious recall. They can only be studied by means of deductions based on comparative examination of speakers' and listeners' moves and countermoves. For analytical purposes, it is useful to assume that extra-linguistic knowledge is introduced into the interpretive process in a series of stages roughly equivalent to Goffman's membrane-like frames (1983). That is to say, interactive sequences of the kind referred to above can be seen as constituents of one or another speech event (Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1974), sequences of acts bounded in real time and space and governed by culturally specific values and norms that constrain both the form and content of what is said.

Thus, although we speak of culture in quite general terms, we can study how culture works by observing or participating in a range of culturally distinct events. Examples of speech events typically described in the traditional literature are ritual performances, ceremonies, or magical rites found in small, traditional, largely face-to-face societies. Yet, the job interviews, counseling sessions, committee meetings, classroom lectures, medical encounters, and other informal encounters that we

typically participate in during the course of our lives also constitute speech events. One way in which they differ from what we know from reading through existing ethnographic accounts is that they are less sharply delimited. We commonly employ event names after the encounter to convey something of what was done at the time. But such labels are not sufficiently refined to capture the details of what goes on in on-line inferencing. In a job interview, for example, a great deal of the time may be spent in casual talk, narratives may be used to illustrate a point, anecdotes may be told, or elaborate directions given, and so on.

To account for conversationalists' ability to distinguish among phases of an event and to agree on what is intended at any one time, we assume that in the initial phase of the interpretive processes listeners seek to relate the ongoing talk to past experiences by categorizing what they see and hear as an instantiation of one or another activity type (Levinson 1983). Whereas speech events exist in time and space, the notion of activity type is used here not to refer to concrete sequences of talk but rather to mental models or schemata of goal-oriented actions. Such models yield criteria for judging what is expected and for inferring how what is said in the course of an event fits into a coherent whole. Agreement on what activity type is being enacted at any one time thus also implies agreement on culturally grounded inferences, such as what the likely communicative outcomes are, what range of topics can be brought up, what information can be expressed in words, and what interpretations should be alluded to indirectly by building on shared understanding (Gumperz 1981, 1982).

At a more local level of inferencing, further down in the Goffmanian hierarchy, interpretations are made about more immediate, or communicative, tasks, such as how to respond to a particular move, how to initiate a topic, how to open or close an interaction, how to shift topics or distinguish main information from subsidiary points, how to make asides and, most importantly, how to allocate turns at talk and claim the floor. It is the above level of verbal interaction, which we can refer to as conversational management, that has received the most attention in the by now well-known sociological research on conversational analysis. In an extensive series of studies of sequencing phenomena, conversational analysts have provided convincing evidence to document the many hitherto unnoticed and largely unconscious ways in which maintenance of conversational involvement depends on active interpersonal cooperation and of the interactional complexity of conversational management (Schegloff 2003; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Levinson 1983). But the main goal of this tradition of conversational analysis is the discovery of recurrent sequentially ordered patterns or structures by which conversations are managed. The focus is on what is common to conversational exchanges in general. Conversational analysts do not account for the on-line processing that individuals must do in maintaining conversational cooperation of specific persons nor do they attempt to deal with the role of context and cultural presuppositions in conversation.

Work on bilingualism, code switching and interethnic communication indicates that systematic patterns of language usage are learned through socialization processes similar in some ways to those that guide the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. Code switching can be seen as one of a series of cues, along with intonation, stress, as well as with choice among lexical options and variant pronunciation, which play a crucial role in retrieving the presuppositions entering into the various stages of conversational interpretation. Gumperz (1982) refers to these signs as “contextualization cues” and to the principles by which they work as “contextualization conventions”. While contextualization conventions operate in interaction in ways that are somewhat similar to grammatical rules, they differ in at least one very significant respect. Not all speakers of a language—that is, individuals who can produce grammatical and referentially appropriate sentences in a language—share knowledge of the same set of contextualization conventions.

Recent sociolinguistic research indicates that variants of the type that enter into the choice of dialect, style or language variety in code switching are distributed along lines determined by social networks or class and ethnic boundaries; that is, they are not necessarily co-terminous with what we commonly understand by language boundaries. There is evidence to show that contextualization conventions are similarly distributed within and across regions. Yet they may, under certain conditions, reflect class boundaries and typically do reflect culturally specific socialization experiences in the interethnic relations with which we are concerned (Gumperz 1978).

Contextualization can take many linguistic forms. Among the most important are choices among permissible linguistic options at the level of pronunciation, morphology, syntax or lexicon as in code or style switching, the use of intonation or tone of voice, speech rhythm or pausing, and the use of formulaic phrases or idiomatic expressions that have particular interactional import. It follows from what has been said so far that shared knowledge of contextualization conventions is a precondition for conversational cooperation. Where conventions are not shared, participants are unable to agree on what activity or communicative task is being enacted. They might find themselves unable to predict where the conversation is going or how to integrate what is said into a coherent whole, so that the interaction becomes unpredictable. Attempts at turn allocation or topic shift negotiation fail. Conversationalists are in the position of strangers lost in a foreign city who must try to find their way without being able to rely on road signs. Since contextualization cues are for the most part automatically produced, conversationalists are unlikely, while preoccupied with trying to find their way, to recognize the causes of the current difficulties. As a result, they are likely to misjudge each other’s intent, the other’s abilities, or even state of mind so that miscommunications may result in irritation or anger and participants are likely to see aggression and violence where what is being signaled is perhaps only the other participant’s perception of loss of control and irritation (Gumperz 1992).

Yet miscommunications of this type can be detected after the fact through close analysis of the extent to which moves are coordinated in interactional exchanges. We can distinguish between highly cooperative exchanges where listeners readily respond to speakers' moves, where interruption and repairing or correcting what was said are rare, and where topic transitions are smoothly negotiated. The linguistic evidence for smooth cooperation can be found at two levels: (a) in the semantic relationships or ties among successive moves and in the degree to which second speakers are successful in making the expected inferences from a first speaker's indirect speech acts; (b) in the rhythmic synchrony of the conversational exchange. Smooth interactions, as Erickson (2004) has repeatedly shown, have a kind of synchronicity similar to that which musicians achieve in successful ensemble playing. Failure to achieve cooperation, on the other hand, is evidenced by lack of success in the above tasks, by a high incidence of both interruptions and failed attempts at repair, as well as by failure to achieve rhythmic coordination.

Cultural Misunderstandings

In interactional sociolinguistics (IS), as the approach described here has recently become known, analyses of communicative failures begin with the discovery of misunderstandings. Repeated instances of misunderstandings are isolated and compared both at the semantic level and at the level of form to look for patterns. When speakers of similar ethnic background encounter communication difficulty and reveal similarities in the way they react to partners' moves, we hypothesize that systematic differences in contextualization conventions are at work. To test such hypotheses we can then turn to in-group interactions where participants share the same background. When it appears that the signaling strategies resulting in failure in interethnic situations are successful when background is shared, we can assume that our hypotheses are confirmed. By means of further comparative analysis we can then begin to specify what the differences in contextualization conventions are and why and how they affect the communication processes.

In our work so far, a number of case study analyses of communicative breakdowns have been completed using procedures like the ones above. These include legal situations analyzed in connection with the preparation of expert court testimony in cases where misunderstandings could easily have led to injustice (Gumperz 1982, 1998). In other career counseling situations, frustrations and anger caused by misunderstandings led the counselor to be accused of domineering and negative behavior, while the interviewee was perceived as unnecessarily uncooperative and guilty of verbal aggression (Gumperz 1982). In some employment interviews, applicants were falsely accused of lack of technical knowledge, while interviewers were charged with racial prejudice (Gumperz and Roberts 1991); in others the failure of the interviewers to recognize the interviewees best attempts at explanation resulted in frustration and unfair rejections from training programs (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 2002).

It should be emphasized that, although we rely on isolation of instances of miscommunication, we do not claim that miscommunication always results from cultural differences. Even in culturally homogeneous situations people miscommunicate. What distinguishes the situations that we have studied is the fact that (a) miscommunications are more frequent than usual and that (b) the ordinary mechanisms of conversational repair, by which we avoid ill effects, tend to fail. We can find many instances where, as people attempt to fix a misunderstanding, new misunderstandings arise and the situation becomes hopelessly confused. Our findings so far can perhaps best be presented in the form of a list of hypotheses concerning both the communicative, cultural and societal sources of misunderstandings and their relationships to individuals' backgrounds:

(1) Understanding in speech events rests on what Hanks (1996), following Silverstein (1992), calls communicative practice. Understanding in communicative practice relies on two types of knowledge: (a) grammar and lexical signs that signal via the well known grammatical rules and lexical semantics and (b) indexical signs and among them contextualization conventions that signal by direct association between sign and context;

(2) The potential for miscommunication is a function of differences in taken-for-granted, culturally specific knowledge acquired in the course of socialization experiences and differences in discourse conventions. While grammar plays a role in discourse, it affects the communicative phenomena we have discussed only inasmuch as it affects our ability to understand what the communicative intent is at a particular point in an utterance. Indexical signs are also essential to discourse level understanding. This suggests that, contrary to what applied linguists and anthropologists tend to assume, the mere fact that native language differences exist does not necessarily have serious consequences for understanding and the maintenance of conversational cooperation;

(3) Discourse conventions are learned through interpersonal contact. Learning requires a great deal of feedback, and it is the quality of the learning situation that determines learning. Most favorable to learning are peer situations, where speakers can give each other the benefit of the doubt and feel that they can make mistakes without fear of being misjudged. Hierarchical situations, where feedback opportunities are constrained by norms governing conduct, are less conducive to learning. This means that not all individuals of a certain ethnic background encounter communication problems. Those who enter a new society as individuals are more likely to learn the new discourse conventions than those who migrate in groups. When people settle in groups, they may adopt a new language but, in their interpersonal contacts, they are likely to develop discourse conventions based on previous communicative experiences that are perceived as discrepant by majority group members (see Gumperz 1978);

(4) When interpreted in light of what is known about the spread of dialect and stylistic differences, our findings suggest that knowledge of discourse signaling conventions are an areal phenomenon, so that members of otherwise distinct language communities that have a long history of intergroup contact share similar conventions even when their languages are not genetically related as is the case, for example, with the native speakers of French, German, Basque and Hungarian. On the other hand, miscommunication is likely to be particularly frequent and serious in encounters between western Europeans or Anglo-Americans and Asians, Africans or American Indians, whose communities have had much less or only sporadic contacts with the former;

(5) The incidence of miscommunication is also a function of the cognitive demands of the activity at hand. Persuasion and extensive argumentation require politeness and the ability to use circumlocution and other forms of indirectness. Such indirectness strategies are highly culturally specific. When they lead to misunderstandings and speakers attempt to repair the damage, they must, because of the very nature of the communicative task, rely on strategies like those that caused the problems in the first place, thus compounding the damage rather than remedying the difficulties. These phenomena lead to frustration, irritation, and aggressive behavior in the short run. Over time, unless something is done to break the cycle, repeated communicative failures in situations that are demonstrably important in determining an individual's life chances can cause permanent antagonisms and increase the chances for violent confrontation;

(6) The long-term consequences of miscommunication in interethnic encounters can be seriously affected by the sociopolitical environment in which these encounters take place. The reason for this is that the inferences that we make about others' intent in such encounters are always highly context specific and depend on the degree of mutual knowledge among participants. Interethnic situations are, for the most part, bureaucratic situations marked by asymmetry of power relations where those less powerful are likely to be judged and evaluated by the bureaucratically dominant. As a result, problems that in other contexts may pass as minor tend to become magnified; that is, they may be preserved as part of a permanent record and thus reinforce mutual stereotyping and result in inequities;

(7) It is possible, by means of close examination using the procedures we have outlined, to distinguish between communication breakdowns attributable to cultural differences and breakdowns due to interpersonal conflict or other kinds of disagreement. Such an inquiry provides further insight about the consequences of cultural miscommunication.

How do we isolate the linguistic sources of miscommunication? The analyses below focus on context-bound interpretation rather than on sentence level grammar and referential meaning, to see how linguistic/cultural differences enter into our

perception of social phenomena. In what follows we give some concrete examples to illustrate the interactional sociolinguistic approach to discourse.

A. Interview in a Medical Clinic Specializing in Respiratory Problems

In all four transcripts capitalization marks emphasis. Sequences of two or three periods indicate speech pauses. The “—” marks interrupted speech. Period, comma, and question mark signal clause final, phrase final endings, and questions respectively. Capitalization is used to mark emphasis.

1. Dr: do you relate your uhm . . . wheezing at all to physical exertion?
2. Pt: yeah sure.
3. Dr: what happens?
4. Pt: . . . well, . . I wheeze.
5. Dr: do you ever use the inhaler before exercising?
6. Pt: (. . .) no I'm not generally attuned enough to do that,
 though I suppose that would be a good idea to do that when-
7. Dr: does swimming cause uh wheezing?
8. Pt: any exercise can uh bring on wheezing, any real exertion.
9. Dr: WELL IT'S A THOUGHT, because you see if you were-
 you're using your inhaler very infrequently . .
10. Pt: right.
11. Dr: and um . . . since your asthma is seemingly-
 at least in part physically connected, (. . .)
 if you were to inhale two sprays . .
12. Pt: before I did some exercise,
13. Dr: properly before exercising, you could probably exercise more- . .

14. Pt: right.
15. Dr: and therefore develop a better level of fitness.
16. Pt: mmmhmm. okay, yes I'm listening carefully.
17. Dr: and then through improved cardiovascular fitness
18. Pt: exercise more, right.
19. Dr: then you'll find that you could exercise,
without getting short of breath.
20. Pt: right.

Because of the nature of the illness, the doctor in the above encounter is faced with the task of persuading the patient to monitor his own condition and use his medicine accordingly. In order to make sure that the patient understands and agrees to what needs to be done, the doctor adopts an informal conversational style so that the patient feels free to respond with his own comments, thus providing the doctor with an opportunity to check the success of his strategy and to build on the other's responses to make sure he is understood. Note that in line 4, the patient hesitates before answering as if he were not quite sure of what is intended. In line 6, he pauses again but his comment indicates that he is beginning to understand. When it appears that he infers that the doctor asks him to use his inhaler more frequently, the doctor interrupts, suggesting yet another cause of wheezing. From the response in line 8, it is now clear that the patient has understood and the doctor then returns to the theme of increasing the use of the inhaler, using the highly idiomatic phrase, "It's a thought." The patient now seems ready to receive the pedagogical message, which the doctor proceeds to deliver, shifting to a slightly slower tempo, while at the same time continuing to provide opportunities for the patient to respond.

The doctor accomplishes his goal of persuading the patient to agree to a course of treatment by relying almost entirely on indirect verbal strategies and on the patient's ability to draw the expected inferences. Style-shifting from relatively colloquial to more formal talk and vice versa, as well as agreement on the part of both participants on the communicative import of such shifts, are important determinants of the success of these strategies.

B. Office Conversation

Secretary (B) talks to a recently appointed research assistant (A) who has just entered the building.

1. A: good morning.
2. B: HI JOHN. .
3. A: HOWDI.
4. B: HOW'RE YA DOIN?
5. A: fine . . . ah . . . do you know-
did you get anything back on those forms you had me fill out?
6. B: hm . . . like what?
7. A: I wondered if they sent you a receipt or anything or a copy of-
8. B: ==you mean your employment forms?
9. A: yeah.
10. B: yeah, I kept a copy. why, is there a question?
11. A: cause I just left it with the anthropology department.
12. B: oh, that's ok, they'll just send them over to 1 and s. and they'll send
them on.
13. A: I just wanted to make sure they're ok.
14. B: oh yeah. don't worry about it.

The encounter opens with a greeting exchange. Although it might at first seem strange that the interactants exchange two rather than just one set of greetings, data from conversational analysis shows that this is a common occurrence. The first greeting serves to acknowledge each other's presence, while the second indicates readiness to enter into an encounter. But notice the style-shift that takes place between lines 1 and 4. (A)'s rather formal "Good morning" is met with an informal "Hi," whereupon (A) follows suit. The shift in this initial phase of the interaction

serves as an indexical sign that enables the two participants to negotiate an informal relationship, which is maintained throughout the encounter in spite of the fact that the goal of the encounter is purely instrumental: (A) merely wants to find out if his employment forms have been sent on to the proper administrative office for processing. But as in the medical interview, both parties rely on indirect inferences rather than on direct requests.

C. Training Center Selection Interview 1: Bradford U.K.

Participants include the monolingual British-English applicant (T), the personnel officer (R), and the training instructor (C). The purpose of these interviews is to select participants for a paid training course that will enable them to move into specialist positions.

1. R: come in, . . . hello mr T.
2. T: hello.
3. R: take a seat, (. . .) and let me introduce mr C, an instructor at the skill center.
4. T: hmmm.
5. C: how do you do.
6. R: —and you understand that
. . . the panel you're here . . . ehm . . . at today, the purpose of it is to confirm, . . . finally, that ah . . . you've chosen the right course.
7. T: yeah.
8. R: and to give you the opportunity to ask questions you want to ask.
Can I just check with you a few details? Are you still living- eh . . . in . . . eh . . . ?
9. T: yeah in . . . Driscoe, Bar Hill.
10. R: Bar Hill, . . . Brookside is it?

11. T: Brooks- Brookside, yes.
12. R: Brookside.
13. T: mhm
14. R: and can I just . . . try and follow one or two things, on the form you completed? . . . ehm, you haven't served an apprenticeship?
15. T: . .no, no . .
16. R: no, I think you just crossed the wrong one there. just ah..
17. T: oh yeah.
18. R: have you visited the skill center?
19. T: yeah.
20. R: ..yeah.
21. T: I've been there, yeah.
22. R: so you've had a chance to look around. and did you look in on the brickshop?
23. T: ah yeah, we had a look around the brickshop, and um . . it looks, it looked ok. I mean it's . .
24. R: mhm.
25. T: pretty good, yeah.

D. Skill Center Selection Interview 2

The participants are an Indian-English speaking bilingual applicant (I), a personnel officer (R) and an instructor (C).

1. R: hello mr I.
2. I: good morning to you.

3. R: how do you do, do take a seat
 . . . this is Mr. C. an instructor at the skill center, and
4. C: hello mr M.
5. R: I'm from the training services.
6. I: yes.
7. R: before we can go any further, and...if there are any questions you want
 to ask please do so.
8. I: . . mhm.
9. R: ok. have you visited the skill center?
10. I: yes, I ..I've been once.
11. R: you've been once.
12. I: yeah.
13. R: and how long were you there?
14. I: . . well, . . . there?
15. R: mhm.
16. I: just a . . three hour.
17. R: just for the visit?
18. I: yeah. just for a visit.
19. R: yeah? . . . did you have a good look round the center? or did you just
 go into one section?
20. I: no I . . been there, around all . . all the center.
21. R: yeah.
22. I: yeah.. I go..

23. R: so you saw ALL the classes there?
24. I: . . . well I came from college . . just to visit . . mm and . . ah I was in the other course . . that time, in the vocational preparation course.
25. R: mhm.
26. M: mr . . W was our teacher, and he sent us there.
27. T: mhm
28. M: and we been there . . with the course.
29. R: yeah.
30. M: yeah.

As in the preceding two encounters, the general tone or interpersonal atmosphere is negotiated in the course of the interaction. In example C, this atmosphere is relatively relaxed and informal. This can be seen in the initial greeting exchange in line 1 and 2, where (R)'s "Hello" is returned by an equally informal "Hello." Throughout, (T)'s responses are accepted as positive contributions to the interchange. When (R)'s "Yeah" interrupts (R)'s long speech in line 3, his interruption is treated as a sign he is following what she has to say. In line 6, he again interrupts to supply information that he infers (R) has difficulty recalling and his interruption is accepted. From the exchange in the next four lines, it appears that the two understand each other. In the sequence beginning with line 14, when (R) raises questions about the written questionnaire answers he has filled out, she phrases her questions in such a way as to suggest what answers she wants. Note that she herself suggests by the way he puts her question, "You haven't served an apprenticeship?" that he may have made a potentially damaging mistake in his written answers on the application. When she says, "I think you just crossed the wrong one," he takes the hint and quickly confirms her suggestion. There follow a series of questions designed to check whether (T) has taken the opportunity to acquaint himself with the training center and to look over the available facilities. She again suggests what answers she wants and the applicant is quick to follow up on them.

Interview D, where the applicant is an Indian-English speaking bilingual, follows a similar initial pattern of questioning but the process of negotiating interpersonal relationships is far from successful. When (R)'s initial "Hello" is met with a dissonant formal sounding "Good morning to you," the atmosphere stiffens, as evidenced by the fact that (R)'s style also becomes more formal. Note what happens in the sequence beginning with line 9, where (R) as she did in the previous interview,

asks (M) what he has done to acquaint himself with the center facilities. His answers are met with further questions that only serve to confuse him and, when he tries to provide further evidence, his explanations only confirm the interviewer's doubt. The two interactants fail to negotiate the shared understandings on which successful communication rests. Although both applicants speak referentially intelligible English, their linguistic repertoires differ in the sense that they do not control the same range of stylistic alternates. And (R) in transcript D is unable to make the indirect inferences, which, as our previous examples show, are so important in determining the outcome of an interaction.

Conclusion

What we have illustrated here are not isolated cases. In our large corpus of audio- and videotaped interactions between bilingual and monolingual residents living in the same urban environment, similar misunderstandings occur again and again. Since participants are not aware of the importance that choice among alternates within their repertoire has in controlling the course of an interaction, the resulting misunderstandings are not ordinarily recognized for what they are. The tendency is to blame the other and misjudge their attitudes or, what is worse, their abilities. The applicant in interview D failed to gain admission to the course while the monolingual applicant was judged acceptable. Studies of discrimination, made in Britain at the time when interview C took place, indicate that among applicants for positions who reach the interview stage, the rate of rejection for bilinguals is significantly higher than for monolinguals. It would seem that our failure to understand the communicative consequences of linguistic diversity may serve to further the hegemonic practice of judging minority group speech in terms of the majority's equally culture bound standards, with the result that potential for conflict is increased rather than reduced. There clearly is a case for more detailed studies of communicative processes that go beyond the prevailing macro-sociolinguistic categories to show how diversity works to affect our ability to cooperate in the conduct of our daily lives. Although these cases are monolingual situations, their analysis also has some relevance for bilingual situations. In such situations, although speakers may count as speaking the same languages, their stylistic resources are not shared and this leads to misunderstanding and misevaluation of ability, which may be an important factor in the frustrations that bilinguals experience in their contacts with others. Still, their supposed failings certainly cannot be attributed to cultural difference alone, as they appear so often in mass media.

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