

Cross-linguistic communication missteps¹

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Abstract

Sociolinguistically-oriented work in cross-cultural communication (Davies et al. 1989; Ellis and Roberts, 1987; Erickson and Schultz, 1982; Gumperz, 1982, 1984; Lakoff, 1984; Tannen, 1986b; Tyler et al., 1988) has demonstrated that many of the sources of miscommunication involve a complex set of elements at the discourse level. The research also indicates that the sources of miscommunication are largely inaccessible to the participants, suggesting that some kind of intervention making the sources of miscommunication explicit is necessary in order to allow demystification of the communicative missteps. This paper offers an integrated discourse framework, i.e. one which combines: (1) the multiple perspectives embodied in the participants and the analyst; (2) the construct of situated interpretation; (3) the interrelatedness of cues from many levels of linguistic organization; and (4) the cumulative effect of miscues within the emergent process of the interaction. The model which is assumed elaborates on Gumperz's theory of conversational inference by incorporating Erickson's notion of conversational synchrony and aspects of Ellis and Roberts' four-part model. Building on Tyler et al., (1988) in which a set of interrelating cues were identified as sources of the perception of incoherence for American undergraduates in the lecture discourse of International Teaching Assistants, this paper uses the analysis of a videotaped episode of a key problematic situation involving a Korean Teaching Assistant in an American university and an American undergraduate, which occurred during a routine classroom observation, in order to extend the model. Moving from a lecture participant structure to a dyadic structure which involves conflicting goals for the interlocutors, we re-examine the cues identified in the lecture context and find (1) that their situated interpretation requires a further consideration of other dimensions of the discourse and (2) that the notion of context as processual and evolutionary is necessary in order to provide the appropriate frame for a model of the complex interactions present in situated, cross-linguistic communication.