

Cultural Difference as Conversational Object

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This paper explores the existence of culture as an available, hearable, objective, scientific feature of conversational interaction by closely examining some examples of sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies in educational settings, and of the effects of cultural difference on conversational interaction. It contrasts these approaches with an ethnomethodological approach to studying the phenomenon of cultural difference in interaction. The argument developed through this analysis is that it is more heuristic to think of cultural difference as a phenomenon created reflexively through participants' orientation to each others' talk and action, and thus as a contingent feature of that interaction.

Cet article explore, d'une part, l'existence de la culture comme une caractéristique accessible, audible, objective et scientifique de l'interaction dans les conversations en analysant certaines études sociolinguistiques et ethnographiques menées dans des contextes éducatifs et, d'autre part, les effets des différences culturelles sur l'interaction dans les conversations. L'auteur compare ces approches à l'analyse ethnométhodologique du phénomène des différences culturelles dans l'interaction. Selon cette dernière analyse, il serait plus heuristique de considérer les différences culturelles comme un phénomène créé de façon réflexive à travers l'orientation des participants vers les mots et les gestes des uns et des autres et, par conséquent, comme une caractéristique qui dépend de cette interaction.

INTRODUCTION

This paper sees culture as an interactional phenomenon manifesting itself in language and as an achieved, rather than ascribed aspect of a person's identity. Culture is visible in members' interaction with other members. I believe this notion of culture to be more heuristic than the view that culture is an objective feature of identity determined by background knowledge and mother tongue. My position is that whatever the biographical features of a culture may be for any individual member of that culture, the display of these features exists as members' and/or analysts' accounts in respect to visible or hearable features of the interaction. Culture is an occasioned description of members' orientations to each other. In my view culture is not a scientific concept to be

used *a priori* to analyze and to explain problems in interaction; rather, it is a common-sense notion people use as if it were clear, unambiguous, and non-reflexive. However, when people do so they do not, in a scientific sense, explain anything at all. They merely contribute an occasion of its use.

Cultural difference is significant insofar as its identification and use on any occasion makes it a hearably important feature. But each of these instances is not a microcosm of the concept embracing all of its defining features. Rather, it is what *counts as* culture in the specific instance.

In this sense a person's cultural identity can be thought of as a phenomenon interactionally created. The creation of that identity creates and is created by the ongoing definition and redefinition of the setting. But cultural identity cannot be used as an *a priori* explanation of interactional problems.

This approach to understanding the existence of cultural identity differs markedly from traditional anthropological and contemporary sociological approaches that take cultural identity for granted and use it as a *resource* for analyzing social relations, symbols, language use, or material objects (Berg, 1987). This paper views cultural identity as a *topic to be explained* rather than as a taken-for-granted resource (Garfinkel, 1967).

CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AS RESOURCE

The work of John Gumperz provides an introduction to one sociolinguistic approach to the construction of an analytic framework in which linguistic and sociocultural knowledge is an explanatory variable. Theoretically speaking, this knowledge is necessary for sustained conversational interaction. Gumperz's belief that certain shared cultural resources are needed for this sustained interaction led him to develop the concept of conversational inference, the study of context-bound interpretation of others' intentions. In order to study speakers and listeners who are conversing from different social and cultural backgrounds, Gumperz tried to "isolate cues and symbolic conventions through which distance is maintained or frames of interpretations are created" (Gumperz, 1982, p. 7). Gumperz hopes the study of conversational inference will contribute to social theory by showing how people, employing verbal and nonverbal strategies, implicitly and explicitly use background knowledge in interpreting talk.

Gumperz's study of conversational inference is based on analyses of talk in uni- and cross-cultural settings. In his analyses, he examines both talk and setting for contextualization cues. Cues include prosody

(intonation and stress) and paralinguistic features (pitch, register, loudness, rhythm and tempo) (Gumperz, 1982, p. 160).

A second aspect of conversational inference is the signalling of communicative goals, by which participants interpret the meaning of talk. These goals are signalled by the features of the talk itself as well as by the members' social background knowledge.

In practice, Gumperz's analyses of how members' background knowledge is a feature of the interaction work themselves out in terms of the following analytical categories:

- (1) basic cultural norms;
- (2) prosody;
- (3) syntax;
- (4) historical traditions.

These are not an exhaustive, discreet, or exclusive set of categories in Gumperz's work. It would be impossible to arrive at a definitive list because of the vagueness and ambiguity of the concepts involved. An example of his studies will show best what he is up to.

An interview between an East Indian male and a British female during an interview-counselling session at the London Department of Employment, Centre for Interethnic Communication Problems in British Industry, will serve to illustrate Gumperz's method. A staff member and a Pakistani teacher of mathematics unable to get a permanent teaching job, allegedly because of poor communication skills, both educated speakers of English, converse. Gumperz provides excerpts from the full transcript. Here is the first excerpt:

Case Study 1

A: Indian male speaker; B: British female speaker

B has just asked A for permission to record the interview, and A's first utterance is in reply to her request.

- 1 A: exactly the same way as you, as you would like
- 2 to put on
- 3 B: Oh no, no
- 4 A: there will be some of the things you would like to
- 5 B: yes
- 6 A: write it down
- 7 B: that's right, that's right (laughs)
- 8 A: but, uh . . . anyway it's up to you (pause, about 1 second)
- 9 B: um, (high pitch) . . . well . . . I I Miss C.
- 10 A: first of all
- 11 B: hasn't said anything to me you see (pause, about 2 seconds)
- 12 A: I am very sorry if she hasn't spoken anything

- 13 B: (softly) doesn't matter
14 A: on the telephone at least,
15 B: doesn't matter
16 A: but ah . . . it was very important uh thing for me
17 B: yes. Tell, tell me what it is you want
18 A: umm
19 Um, may I first of all request for the introduction please
20 B: Oh yes sorry
21 A: I am sorry
(pause, about 1 second)
22 B: I am E.
23 A: Oh yes (breathy) I see . . . oh yes . . . very nice
24 B: and I am a teacher here in the Centre
25 A: very nice
26 B: and we run
27 A: pleased to meet you (laughs)
28 B: different
29 courses (A laughs) yes, and you are Mr A?
30 A: N.A.
31 B: N.A. yes, yes, I see (laughs). Okay, that's the
32 introduction (laughs)
33 A: Would it be enough introduction?

Gumperz emphasizes the participants' failure to negotiate an understanding of a common theme in the interview and to adjust for differences in their expectations of what the interview was to accomplish. In brief, Gumperz defines conversational synchrony as speakers' moves and listeners' responses that have a regular, measurable, rhythmic beat that provides "empirical measures of conversational cooperation which reflect automatic behaviour, independent of prior semantic assumptions about content or function of what was said" (1982, p. 176). Synchrony, he argues, is more evident in interactions among people of shared sociocultural backgrounds than among people who do not share this background, provided there are not "other overt signs of disagreement" (p. 176). In the present transcript, conversation is frequently asynchronous. Gumperz finds a lack of coordination in a number of utterances where the placement of the verbal response seems wrong in terms of his hearing of what a coordinated exchange should be like in his earlier studies of interactive synchrony (1982, pp. 176–177). He says that ethnic difference is available in the rhythm and prosody of the talk such that native English speakers of different cultural backgrounds hear the intent and meaning of the utterances differently. In saying this Gumperz

characterizes the participants' interpretive processes that he and his informants hear in the talk. His interpretation of the talk concentrates on the timing of responses, on interruptions, and on some utterances that he identifies as formulaic for Indian English speakers. Gumperz's interpretation thus emphasizes elements that should be hearable and available to us in the participants' orientation to each others' talk as ethnic features of the sequential unfolding of the talk itself. He proposes a constellation of items we are to notice as culturally different ways of speaking.

Gumperz suggests that cultural difference *explains* different ways of speaking English which in turn *explains* why "both speakers fail in their efforts to negotiate a common frame in terms of which to decide on what is being focused on and where the argument is going at any one time" (p. 185).

But what is explained? When we contrast Gumperz's analysis of the talk, for example, to Schegloff's analysis of talk in his paper "On Some Questions and Ambiguities in Conversation" (1977), the notion of talk as comprised of scientific categories for analysis is quickly dispelled. Schegloff presents good evidence that analysis of the sequential unfolding of talk in conversation must be rooted in that sequentiality as the essential analytic feature, and not in the use of a priori categories of action. The warrant for the meaning and the structure of talk must be found in an examination of the sequential utterances whose construction and placement is constrained by their place in the talk. How then is Gumperz justified in his claim that a common frame for topic is not arrived at?

Looking again at the transcript, we can make a number of observations about the progress of the talk without depending solely on prosodic elements. In fact, in order to substantiate Gumperz's claims regarding these elements, we would have to show the conversation going wrong in a hearable way, for the participants.

The first noticeable feature is that the speakers take turns at talk and there is an orderly connection between the sequential utterances of the speakers in terms of topic (that is, the utterances are not generally heard as random, chaotic, or meaningless). The second feature we can observe is that some of the utterances are hearable as odd in the sequential context of utterances (for example, what is heard as an introduction in lines 22–32 is queried by A in line 33: "Would it be enough introduction?"). The strangeness seems to be in understanding how this utterance works in the context of the sequence of talk leading up to it. The question asks about the adequacy of the information provided by way of introduction by either or both speakers. Its conditional tense calls

for a further question in response (that is, "Would it be enough introduction for what?"), indicating a problem in understanding the reason or meaning of the initial question, given that introductions have taken place.

This is not to say that there might not be a good reason for the question; however, it is not clear what B might respond with as an appropriate next utterance; and, unfortunately, Gumperz has not given us the rest of that part of the transcript.

His own explanation of this utterance, which he characterized as suggesting "That something is going wrong" (p. 176), is that it illustrates a complex problem rooted in the sociocultural differences of the speakers. I would argue that such differences, though nominally present, have not been shown to account for the problem in utterance (33).

Gumperz goes on to say that (33) shows A "has quite different expectations of what the introduction was to accomplish." After explaining at some length the Asian version of what interviews such as the one in this example are meant to accomplish, he comments that A expects B to help him get the certificate he needs for a teaching position rather than to arrange more language training for him. Gumperz concludes that "Before he [A] can make his request, however, he needs to find out what her [B's] position in the organization is so that he can judge the extent to which she is able to help him. That is what he wants to accomplish with his requests for introductions" (p. 182).

We must, however, question Gumperz's conclusion *on the basis of the evidence he provides*. In lines 22–32, B describes herself as a teacher in the Centre running different courses. Therefore it seems unlikely that B would herself conclude that more introduction is demanded by the situation. And, if we accept Gumperz's Asian version of the utterances we could argue that B *has* in fact told A her position in the organization.

How then do we hear cultural difference as an explanation of A's utterance in (33) in terms of the sequential unfolding of the talk itself? One potential warrant for such a hearing is the absence of an immediately apparent sequential context for such a conditional mood of question. For a white native English speaker from Britain or North America an appropriate utterance in (33) could be drawn from a wide range of possible utterances, including further elicitations in respect to B's professional role and responsibilities. However, the constraints of the context in this interview situation as established by the utterances thus far make the meaning of (33) normatively opaque since it suggests a reference to a context beyond the present one that is hearable as irrelevant as a constraint or condition of the current talk thus far, a context that has not been hearably established by either of the speakers.

The problem with Gumperz's analysis is not that there is not a *prima facie* case to be made for the notion of cultural difference in this talk, but that his explanation uses cultural difference as a taken-for-granted fact of the interaction, rather than as a feature to be demonstrated; and, the absence in his article of the utterances immediately following (33) shows his analysis lacks a rigorous examination of the constraints and structures of hearably correct utterances in a context of preceding and subsequent utterances.

We have attempted to show above that utterance (33) presents a case of an utterance that is difficult to understand within, and as coming out of a particular context of utterances and as such is hearably problematic (that is, it needs to be explained using extra-conversational features of the interaction, especially in the absence of subsequent utterances that could be used to show how the problem utterance is handled by the participants).

In general we are arguing that rather than explaining how cultural difference is hearable as an oriented-to feature of the interaction, Gumperz uses the ascribed characteristics of culture normatively present to show how the talk can be heard as an example of cross-cultural trouble in understanding. Cultural difference is for him an *a priori* feature of the situation. As analyst, he uses it to explain mental states of the participants in the form of cultural expectations, when the mental states of the participants are unknowable.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AS TOPIC

In my own work on cultural differences, I have studied two English-speaking classrooms: one Native Canadian and one Anglo-Canadian. The Native children are in a grade one class in a public system in a rural town in Western Canada. English is their second language.

The Anglo-Canadian children are in an early childhood education kindergarten class in a public system in a city in Western Canada.

The teachers of both classes are Anglophone.

My analysis looks at the asynchronous talk in each classroom to see if there are similarities and/or differences in the kind of trouble that is hearable. I then consider if it is reasonable to argue that cultural difference is the source of the trouble.

I have chosen trouble in talk because I can common-sensically argue that trouble is a manifestation of talk in the classroom. In the sequentiality of classroom talk, children and teacher hearably orient to each other's talk. We can hear certain structures of utterances, such as adjacency pairs, sequentially providing for appropriate next utterances

that, in turn, show understanding of contextual features, meaning, and appropriateness of talk. We can say there is trouble in the talk when we hear utterances as faulted or asynchronous in a sequence of utterances. The following example illustrates this point:

Example 1

- 5 T: Judy stand, you can help with this one. Come on up Judy and put the helping hand on it. Then we'll need you to count the children so we know how many are here (). Do you remember when we counted last time—I had you walk around and touch for each number, so please sit up nice and tall so Judy can count you carefully. Let's count with Judy.
- 6 T: And children: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . . and yourself, eighteen.
- 7 P: Nineteen, twenty
- 8 T: No, there are eighteen children here today, right . . .

In this sequence we recognize utterance (7) as trouble in light of T's negative sanction of (7) in (8). Utterance (7) is heard as problematic because of T's utterance in (8). The trouble is found in an utterance by looking at the orientation of other speakers to that utterance as the talk unfolds sequentially.

Samples of asynchronous talk include speaking out of turn, incorrect answers, speaking when not recognized by the teacher, not speaking when called on, and others. Having established that such trouble exists and how to describe it, social science would argue that we still have the problem of what causes it. When we find trouble in the talk of a child from a minority culture or linguistic background, how reasonable is it to say that the trouble is caused, in whole or in part, by that background?

To try to answer this question I examined transcripts from each of the classes mentioned above and pulled out of these transcripts utterance sequences that contain instances of asynchronous talk. In each of the trouble sequences, I have tried to describe the trouble: how it is hearable as trouble in structure and/or meaning in the talk of the participants. I have then tried to suggest a principled explanation of its source or sources.

This approach grounds its explanation of trouble sources in those aspects of social interaction available both to participants and to analyst, rather than in commonly used, but unrigorous, ill-defined glosses of behaviour such as cultural difference. It provides the analyst and the audience with the record of the trouble sequence as it is available in a form as near to first-order reality as we can get at this time. It allows

description and interpretation of trouble from direct observation of the interaction that reflexively produced that trouble. Trouble is available to us as a hearable feature of the talk, embedded in the context of the social interaction where it is found, rather than only available as cultural difference inferred by the analyst from some unrecoverable social situation.

I first discuss trouble spots in the teacher/pupil talk in an Anglo-Canadian class. The context of the Anglo-Canadian talk is the circle activities at the beginning of the day in which children are being asked to talk about similarities and differences of shapes, objects and people.

Example 2

- 33 T: All right, so there are lots of ways that they are the same. All right
- 34 P: They're both the same shiny
- 35 T: They're both the same what? The same? What's the word you're using?
- 36 P: Shiny
- 37 T: Shiny. They're both shiny.
- 38 P: Uh huh
- 39 T: All right, that a good . . .
- 40 P: No they aren't.
- 41 T: You don't think they're both shiny?
- 42 Ps: One of them is and one of them isn't . . . I don't think they are.
- 43 T: Which one is shiny?
- 44 P: The one you are holding in your . . .
- 45 T: This one? The one on the left, is it shinier than this one?
- 46 Ps: Yes
- 47 T: So, are they the same that way?
- 48 Ps: No.
- 49 P: That one is much darker.
- 50 T: What is the word you use if they're not the same?
- 51 P: Not the same.
- 52 Ps: Different
- 53 T: They're different that way . . .

Example 3

- 134 T: Come on up James. Let's compare the number shirts. Good morning. Could you come around to the other door? All right. What number is Ben wearing?
- 135 Ps: Um. Twelve.

- 136 T: Twelve. All right, twelve. And Jonathan
 137 P: And he's wearing seventeen
 138 T: Seventy, seventy, That's a big number, seventy . . .

Example 4

- 217 T: Hm, that's right. Um would you like me to send them away to centres now, or did you want to talk to them?
 218 R: ()
 219 T: Okay, fine, all right. Uh, I'm going to be calling you over to work at the telephone centre as well, today, so we'll be doing () Okay, let me get on this ()
 220 Ps: [various clicking noises with tongue and fingers]
 221 T: Boys and girls, that noise is not for school . . .

In example 1 the teacher corrects a mistake in counting heads. A single pupil continues counting even when the class has run out of heads to count. In example 2 a pupil corrects another student's account of similarity that the teacher had already evaluated as "All right, that['s] a good . . ." as well as an inaudible or misunderstood utterance. In example 3 the teacher corrects a pupil's identification of the number seventy as seventeen. And, in example 4 the teacher sanctions the children for making inappropriate noises in the class.

All of these examples are hearable as trouble, asynchronous talk, insofar as they interrupt the expected orderly flow of sequential utterances (Heyman, 1984). We hear them marked by utterance sequences that include hearable repair, correction and sanction.

The context of the Native Canadian talk is a lesson discussing the English nursery rhyme "Jack and Jill" that had been read and introduced on a previous day.

Example 5

- 629 T: I think we'll sing that song again and we can be leaves once again. [8 seconds] [noise of movement and chatter] Yesterday we met someone . . . It was a little girl . . . and she went up the hill with Jack and her
 630 P: (Jane)
 631 T: Name was . . .?
 632 Ps: [Responses of "Jill" or "Jane" given]
 633 T: Jill. Was her name Jane?
 634 T: No
 635 P: Jill
 636 T: Jack and Jill, no Jane

Example 6

- 676 T: Just go quietly and quickly . . . Put your hands up if you can tell me why Jack and Jill are going up the hill. Why are they going up here?
- 677 V: Water [almost inaudible]
- 678 T: I hear Virgil. Why are they going up there Virgil? You're right . . . They're going to get something. What're they going to get?
- 679 P: Water
- 680 L: Fetch a pail of water.
- 681 T: What are they going to get, Virgil?
- 682 L: A, fatch a pail of water.
- 683 T: Are they going to get some water? (4 seconds) Colin, can you tell me what happened to Jack . . . when he got to the top of the hill?

Example 7

- 693 T: I want you to take a look at the pictures . . . Can you tell me which one of these children do you think is Jack?
- 694 L: The purple one
- 695 T: Shh? Don't tell. [whispered] Do you think it is the orange one or do you think it is the purple one?
- 696 Ps: Purple one.
- 697 T: Shh? Don't tell. [whispered]
- 698 Ps: Purple one . . . purple one.
- 699 T: Sh! Don't tell. [whispered] Let's look what happens when they go up the hill . . . Oh, Look! [Whispered] Somebody fell down. Which one do you think is Jack?
- 700 C: Purple ().
- 701 T: Mandryk, I see your hand up. Come and show us who is Jack . . . See if Mandryk knows who Jack is . . . Ah, what colour is he Mandryk?
- 702 M: Purple.
- 703 T: Yes, he is. He's purple. So Jack is the
- 704 T/Ps: Purple.
- 705 T: Child because he is the one that . . . what happened to him?
- 706 L: Fall down and broke his crown.
- 707 M: Fall down.
- 708 T: Thank you, Mandryk. You did very nice.

Example 8

- 735 T: Can you come and find the picture? All right you come and find it. [13 seconds of indecipherable utterances] Hmmm.

This picture shows . . . can you see that, Cassandra? Can you see, Angeline? . . . Let's see which one happened first. What did they do first in the story?

736 L: They climbed up.

737 T: Say it with me.

738 T/Ps: Jack and Jill went up the hill
To get a pail of water

739 L: Fetch a pail of water

740 T: Let's see if she can get it.

In the Native class the examples of trouble include the following: In example 5 there is an incorrect formulation of the name of Jack's partner, which the teacher corrects. In example 6 a student does not respond to the teacher's request for a reformulation of a correct answer. In example 7 the teacher sanctions pupils for speaking when they do not have the floor. And, in example 8 a student corrects the teacher's use of a wrong word in the rhyme.

As in examples 1–4, these trouble spots include repairs, corrections, and sanctions, as well as one non-response to an invitation to speak. All are samples of asynchronous talk.

These examples illustrate trouble in talk from two culturally different classes where the trouble is the same. But since the cultural context of the two classes is different, is the cause the same?

In considering the trouble in each cultural context, we find it hard to divorce it from its immediate interactional context. There is no principled way of knowing that cultural knowledge is a primary factor in explaining any of the trouble in any one of the examples. Any utterance provides an occasion for trouble in the sense of giving and allowing the possibility for participants to examine and compare their own understanding of the talk or situation with that of others.

In each version of trouble above, where could we look for evidence of the kinds of participation structures that the children have learned in their cultural community that might clearly affect their classroom talk? Although there may very well be cultural influences on the performances in our examples, where could we say with confidence that they are scientifically available to us as observers of the interaction as compared to their common-sense availability on an a priori basis?

My answer to both of these questions is that cultural difference does not make itself available as an oriented-to feature in the talk. It is difficult to know how an argument could be formulated in other than common-sense terms that some cultural knowledge, or lack of it, provides a plausible organizational feature of the trouble in talk and its remedy.

Of course, since this is a study of only two classrooms I cannot say that a cultural explanation would not be apparent in some future examples. I haven't exhausted the subject. Nevertheless, in light of the argument presented above it is interesting to consider just how a principled argument could be made to support cultural difference or cultural deficit as an observable cause of trouble in talk.

CONCLUSION

In examining cultural difference as a feature of interaction in the cases presented in this paper, I conclude that though cultural difference is nominally recognized as an indexical and reflexive feature of social interaction, it often seems to be perceived as an available structure of social reality in a relatively unproblematic way as well. As such, cultural difference is used as a variable to explain success or failure, or differences in verbal and non-verbal interaction among members of different cultural groups. Social scientists working on cross-cultural interaction often come close to making cultural difference a topic by attempting to show how differences in language and stock of knowledge are themselves interactional features. But these features still turn out to be explained as related to cultural difference in a non-reflexive way (that is, cultural difference is treated as a social fact brought to the analysis of the interaction by the researcher in order to make sense of the talk, to explain how the participants make sense of each other, and to foreground certain features of the talk such as prosody and stock of knowledge; these features are lifted from the interwoven fabric of the interaction to become objective parts of the structure of cross-cultural talk).

Gumperz typifies researchers who see cultural difference as an a priori feature of interaction and use that feature to explain the observed interaction. Cultural difference is an objective aspect of social structure and an interpretive resource for understanding patterns of cross-cultural interaction. Cultural difference is used as object by the researchers in an essentially de-contextualized way. By this I mean that it seems to have meaning outside the context of the interaction being analyzed so that the interaction is understood in terms of a predefined notion of pre-existing cultural difference. From the perspective of conversation analysis this is problematic, for it does not show how the participants use cultural difference as a resource in their talk so that it is hearably oriented-to by others. In conversation analysis literal description of properties of talk is not an epistemologically viable or useful consideration. There seems to be some set of omnipresent and universally invariant properties of

talk that can be described, but it is impossible literally to describe actual properties where these properties do “not depend on speakers’ intentions, or self-understanding” (Heap, 1980). In this sense we come back to the sociological notion of the difference between behaviour and action. We can describe behaviour with more confidence than we can describe action. We can describe talk with more confidence than we can label it as cross-culturally determined.

The use of cultural difference in the work I have discussed seems to be an example of the principled problem of confusing the description of the behaviour with the description of the action (a description of the meaning of the behaviour).

For cultural difference to be a conversational object, rather than a sociological one, we would expect any warrant for its existence to come from an analysis of sequential utterances so constructed and placed as to show understanding of cultural difference (Schegloff, 1978). In our examples, cultural difference is an object in the discourse of the *analysts*, rather than an object in the discourse of the members. I suggest that explaining interactional patterns by appealing to cultural difference is a gloss: a way of accounting for contingent features of talk by invoking as object what is available only as a common-sense, generalized statement of group differences that are necessarily reflexive and indexical.

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