



Interactional Sociolinguistics: A Comparative Analysis of Contextual Miscommunication in British / American and Nigerian Institutional Discourse

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Abstract. This paper examines the vital role context plays in Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) especially as it relates to cross-cultural miscommunications exemplified in British/American and Nigerian data. This study, therefore, critically investigates the intricate dynamics of how context shapes interactional communication, highlighting how cross-cultural differences, linguistic norms and societal expectations and contextualization cues often lead to semantic misrepresentation, misunderstandings and miscommunications. Drawing on empirical data from complex and linguistically diverse cultural background, the study demonstrates how Gumperz IS and contextualization theories can lighten-up the complex interplay between language, culture and context in cross-cultural sociolinguistic interactions. The study drew from purposively selected structured interviews involving electricians, bricklayers, teacher/pupils exchange and Head of Department/staff conversations, which were subjected to discourse analysis. The data reflect work environment across different regions, including USA, UK and Nigeria. The findings reveal that language is consequential in sociocultural context in which communication takes place, and also brings to the fore that effective cross-cultural communication requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep understanding of the cultural nuances and contextual factors that shape interactional dynamics. This paper also contributes to the unburdening of age-long perception that pragmatic context alone rather than cross-cultural differences often lead to miscommunication and distortion of intended meaning in interactional communication in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Interactional Sociolinguistics, Cross-Cultural Miscommunication, Contextualization Cues, Context, Cultural Differences.

1. Introduction

Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) is a sub-discipline of linguistics founded by linguistic anthropologist, John J. Gumperz. Its focus is on discourse analysis. According to Gumperz (2001), IS focuses on how meaning is shaped through social interaction. It is a discipline that is highly interested in cross-cultural miscommunication, politeness, and framing. Politeness is the practical application of good manner while engaging in communication. It is used to make participants in an interaction to feel relaxed and comfortable with one another. Brown and Levinson (1987) identify two types of politeness: negative and positive politeness. Negative politeness is making request with respect to a person's right to act freely. While negative politeness uses indirect speech acts, positive politeness seeks to establish positive relationship between participants in an interaction, which involves the use of direct speech acts (Brown and Levinson 1987). Grice (2001) Maxims can also be considered as an aspect of positive politeness. Politeness is culturally defined such that what may be considered polite in one culture can be considered as rude in another cultural context.

Frame semantics is a theory of linguistic meaning propounded by Charles J. Fillmore. The theory states that for one to understand the meaning of a single word, one must have the essential knowledge that relates to that word. For instance, one would not understand the word "buy" without knowing anything about the situation of commercial transfer, which also involves among other things, a seller, a buyer, goods, money, the relation between money and the goods, the relation between the buyer and the goods and the money, the relation between the seller and the goods and the money and so on. There are three types of frames: Relative, intrinsic and absolute frame of references. Intrinsic frame of reference is a binary spatial relation in which the location of an object is

defined in relation to a part of another object. Absolute frame of reference is also a binary system in which the location of an object is defined in relation to arbitrary fixed bearings. Relative frame of reference in which the location of an object is expressed in relation to both the view point of the perceived and position of an object.

IS in relation to this looks into the application of background knowledge the conversationalists' frame to make meaning out of their interaction. According to Gumperz (2001), conversationalists always rely on knowledge that goes beyond grammar and lexicon to make themselves heard. It therefore tries to figure out what participants have in mind to convey as they engage in everyday interaction. It analyses how people from different cultures may share grammatical knowledge of a language but differently contextualize what is said that different messages are produced. Bailey (2025) reiterates that IS marries the disparity between empirical communicative forms and meanings created from the forms. The communicative forms include linguistic and paralinguistic features. In terms of research methods, it analyses audio or video recordings of conversations or other interactions. Analysis focuses not only on linguistic forms such as words and sentences, but also subtle cues such as prosody and register that signal contextual presupposition. These contextualization cues are culturally specific and usually unconscious. When participants in a conversation come from different cultural backgrounds, they may not recognize these subtle cues in one another's speech, leading to misunderstanding. IS focuses on language in its social context, the language used in interaction by closely observing a speech event in a particular community.

Nevertheless, it is clear that speech event analysis has played an important role in calling attention both to the importance of context in talk and to discourse as principal site for languages and culture studies. As a result, research on language and culture has increasingly come to concentrate on discourse as the basic research site. Ethnographic approaches to conversation share similarities with IS approaches in that they show how culture dictates people's use of language as they engage in communication. This approach tends to dictate people's use of language as they engage in verbal communication. It is the scientific description of peoples and cultures with particular reference to their customs and characteristics. It also studies the differences and relationships between them. Hymes (2010) studies on ethnography show that to situation and uses, linguistic patterns and functions are speaking activity in its own right. He developed a scheme for analyzing context

that has the speech event in which language occurs as its prime unit of analysis: The speech event is to the analysis of verbal interaction what the sentence is to grammar...it represents an extension in the size of the basic analytical unit from the single utterance to stretches of utterances, as well as a shift in focus from ... text to ... interaction (Hymes 2010:17).

Garfinkel (1967) gives some ethnological experiments to reveal that indeed sociocultural background knowledge does influence everyday interactions and decision-makings. He sees interaction as constituted by goal-oriented moves. He is concerned with the interpretative processes through which "interactional outcomes" are achieved. He believes that since talk alone cannot give accurate or detailed intention of the interlocutors; they rely on what he calls "Practical reasoning" and socio-cultural background knowledge to conceive the information that is left unmentioned through talk. This follows what Gumperz (2001) calls an in-built or internalized social order. Events in this case consist of conversation at a party or ordering a meal etc. Hymes' (2010) grids become known as the 'speaking grid', which provides a necessary reminder of the contextual dimensions that determine our use of language. His ethnographic framework led not only to broader notions of the 'communicative competence' language user's display but also to the recognition of the close relationship between speech events and their social or cultural contexts. Again, the theory of variation has made a good contribution to the analysis of discourse based on the analysis of descriptive narratives. This theory was developed by Labov in 1972, and has been very influential in language teaching. Labov and Waletzky (1972) argue that the 'overall structure' of a fully formed narrative of personal experience is: Abstract (summary of story, with its point); Orientation (in respect of place, time and situation); Complication (temporal sequence of events, culminating in crisis); Evaluation (narrator's attitude towards narrative); Resolution (protagonist's approach to crisis); Coda (point about narrative as a whole) (Labov and Waletzky 1972, p. 363).

The Hymes' grid theory has been effectively applied in analyzing narrative of personal experience. This sees people's utterances as situationally cued or conditioned and automatic particularly in the "unselfconscious vernacular mode" which is often the focus of attentions. Schmitt (2010) points out that Labov (1972) did not use the term "genre" but all his analyses as patterned personal experiences deal with genre in language teaching. The theory of variation just like IS looks into how the personal experiences bring about variations in utterances and making meaning of utterances embedded in text linguistics.

The current study also falls within the domain of text linguistics, which is a branch of linguistics that deals with texts as communication systems. It is either the written or spoken form. Text is the actual (extracted) meaning potential of discourse analysis. Text linguistics not only takes into account the form of a text, but also its setting, i.e. the way in which it is situated in an interactional, communicative context. Both the author of a written or spoken text as well as its addressees are taken into consideration in their respective (social and for institutional) roles in specific communicative context. In broader sense, it is the applicant of discourse analysis at the more expanded level of text, rather than just a sentence or word level.

Text is extremely important because people not only communicate by means of fragment of sentences or words in large, but by means of texts. It is also the basis of every other discipline like Law, Politics, Religion, Medicine, Science etc.... A text is best regarded as a semantic unit, a unit not of form but meaning (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 1-2). There is text and there is other text that accompanies it: text it is 'well', namely the con-text. It goes beyond what is written: it includes other non-verbal signs- on-the-total environment in which it unfolds.

Discourse analysis requires three major features of context or situation, namely the field of discourse – experiential meaning, which involves social actions and the role participants give to the understanding of a text; the tenor of discourse – interpersonal meaning, which refers to the roles and relationships among participants that they give to the understanding of a text; the mode of discourse -logical meaning: The meaning that the language, written or spoken, give to the understanding of a text; texture – the “sequential implicativeness”. Any text that lacks texture would simply be a bunch of isolated sentences that have no relationship to each other. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:3) state that a text must meet seven standards of “textuality”: cohesion- the way words are connected in sequence, the “sticking together” of ideas. Eg, “slow cars held up”; coherence- the outcome of cognitive relations such as mutual or common knowledge between participants in discourse, the feeling, that text make sense in relation to its context. Eg. “slow men at work”; intentionality- the text producer’s discourse purpose or goals; acceptability- the text receiver’s attitude of whether the text contains useful relevant details or information such as it’s worth accepting; informativity- whether the degree or amount of information transmitted is suitable for the receiver in the circumstances; situationality-the factors which make a text relevant to the situation in which it occurs

and intertextuality- the way in which a text relies on previous knowledge of one or more encountered texts.

2. Concepts and Tenets of Interactional Sociolinguistics (Is)

IS covers the wide range of communicative environments. It seeks to reconcile theoretical divisions which came as a result of diversity of today's communicative environments. IS claims that for a better understanding of the diverse nature of communication, the way which localized interaction works should be a starting point of studying diversity of interactions. Approaches to diverse nature of interaction differ according to Gumperz (2001) based on relevant data and in the methods of analysis employed.

IS tends to combine these approaches in trying discursive practices. It is on discourse practice communicative practice relies. Interlocutors achieve their communicative goals and aspirations through their communicative practices. In practical sense, when people engage in talks or conversation, they do not rely on words to interpret meaning out of the interaction. They rather rely on interpreting the communicative practices displayed by the speakers or interactants. The main objective of IS is to study how two or more people who engage in a natural interaction exchange speech. It shows how participants in interactions achieve their communicative goals and aspiration in real-life situations by taking into account the cultural shared knowledge and the context within which the interaction takes place. The commonly shared background knowledge usually takes the form of presuppositions which mostly vary according to the nature of the interaction and communicative practices. IS analyses focus on what is termed "conversational inference" by Gumperz (1992) to analyze the communicative practices of interactants. He defines conversational inference as the interpretative procedure by means of which interactants access speaker’s intention at any point in an exchange and produce their responses.

The point of concern is not to analyze the grammatical rule of language but to think of how language devices evoke the contextual presupposition that affect interpretation. Here, concerns are also placed on how presuppositions work in a particular talk exchange. The way which turns are sequentially positioned is really important in making conversational inference. According to Gumperz (2001:219), "many other analytical prior factors are also involved". That still points to the fact that individuals who participate in conversation go beyond the level of literal

interpretation of what is said to interpret and fill what is not said. For instance, Erhovwo had just been talking with Aghogho, and Ese asked Aghogho what they had been doing, he (Aghogho) might answer "I asked Erhovwo if he had some money with him". From this, Ese might infer from the conversation that Aghogho might be planning to borrow money from Erhovwo. Thus, Ese did not make literal interpretation of the statement because in the utterance, there was no word that denoted "borrowing".

Moreover, there are several other possible interpretations to the above utterance but Ese relied on background knowledge acquired through past communicative experience to infer what was intended. What may bring about differences to the interpretation of the utterance is when the background knowledge of the interlocutors differs, and also changes in context. This may cause variations in the interpretation of the utterance. IS analysts show how diversity of background knowledge affects interpretation. It accounts for diversity in the interpretation of conversation. Code-switching, pronunciation, intonation and stress, rhythm, tempo and other supra segmental signs are verbal signs which when combined with grammatical and lexical signs serve to construct "the contextual ground for situated interpretation". This is what Gumperz (1992) calls "contextualization cues". In other words, contextualization cues like prosody, gesture and lexical choice, explores how speakers use them to signal meaning and vividly negotiate understanding in interaction. When this is combined with grammatical and lexical signs, it will construct contextual ground for situated interpretation which affects how message is understood. Lucy (1993: 222) refers to it (contextualization cues) as "meta pragmatic signs". She defines it as "the means by which speakers present information to listeners and how language is being used at any one point in the ongoing exchange". This can be what Toomaneejinda and Saengboon (2022) mean when they posit that IS offers valuable insights into the dynamics of communication, particularly in interactional contexts. Context reveals how differing expectations and interpretations can either facilitate effective interactions or lead to breakdowns in communication

3. Data on Interactional Sociolinguistics

The main purpose of interactional sociolinguistic analysis is to show how diversity and social background affects interpretation. Some of the best known IS analyses were conducted in urban work place settings, where lay participants who are under great pressure to perform, must deal with experts

whose interpretive premises are quite different from theirs, and according to Gumperz (2001); will operate with different "background assumptions." The following extracts from Gumperz's recorded interviews in the mid-1970 in the British Midlands will buttress our discussion on interactional sociolinguistics (IS).

Data 1. ELECTRICIAN

- A. Interviewer: Have you visited the skills center?
- B. Applicant: Yes, I did.
- C. Interviewer: So you have had a look at the workshops?
- D. Applicant: Yes
- E. Interviewer: You know what the training allowance is? Do you?
- F. Applicant: Yeah
- G. Interviewer: Do you know how much you have got to live on for the period of time?

Data 2. BRICKLAYER

- A. Interviewer: Have you visited the skills center?
- B. Applicant: Yep. I've been there. Yeah
- C. Interviewer: so you've had a chance to look around? And did you look in at the bricks shop?
- D. Applicant: Ah yeah. We had a look around the bricks shop and uhm, it look o.k. I mean it's.....
- E. Interviewer: All right.
- F. Applicant: Pretty good yeah.

From the above excerpts, you will discover that the interviewer asks roughly the same questions in each case. However, the two applicants differ in the way they answer and the treatment they receive. In the interview involving the bricklayer, the applicant elaborates his answers, enabling the interviewer to judge how he has interpreted the question. The two applicants/participants actively collaborated in constructing the exchange and we have the impression that they understand each other. In turn (D), for example, when the applicant hesitates as if he were searching for the right word ("I mean it's ..."), the interviewer helps him with "all right" and the exchange ends on a note of agreement. While in the interview involving the electrician, the applicant provides only minimal replies, volunteering no information on his own. We have the impression he is being rather passive, leaving the interviewer to do all the work. When the interviewer in turn (G) rephrases her question about the training allowance, it seems that she is not sure that the applicant understands what she wants of him.

For the electrician, though he has been living in Britain for a number of years, he is a South Asian by background, and the bricklayer is a native of the local

region. We could argue therefore that ideology-based prejudice is at work. There is no question that ideology is an important factor, but experience with this and other similar workplace situations suggest that the treatment the two applicants receive is also due to the fact that, based on their communicative and cultural backgrounds, interviewers and applicants draw different inferences from what they see and hear. IS analyses of such inferential processes can provide evidence to show how such differences come about and how they affect the work place climate.

Further text of the electrician's interview reveals more on the interactional relationship. This time a third person, the course instructor, joins in the questioning. In the first extract, the questioning was designed to test the applicant's knowledge of the course:

- A. Interviewer: And you've put here, that you want to apply for that course because there are more jobs in ... this trade?
 B. Applicant: Yeah (how?).
 C. Interviewer: So perhaps you could explain to Mr. C. apart from that reason, why else you want to apply for electrical work.
 D. Applicant: I think I like ... this profession.
 E. Instructor: And why do you think you'll like it?
 F. Applicant: Why?
 G. Instructor: Could you explain to me why?
 H. Applicant: Why do I like it? I think it is more job prospect.

By using stress to foreground the word "trade" the interviewer is drawing the applicant's attention to the term the applicant used in the written questionnaire he filled out before the interview, relying on him to infer what she intended to convey by this strategy. That is she is indirectly asking the applicant to elaborate, but just like he did in the previous example, the applicant is treating her remarks literally and casually too, as if he has been asked a simple "yes or no" question. When the interviewer tries to elicit more information, by accenting key expressions to call attention to what needs explanation, the applicant simply paraphrases his earlier written response. At this point the course instructor takes over. Like his colleague, he also relies on indirect accenting strategies. Unable to infer what is intended and increasingly uncertain about what he is supposed to say, the applicant once again rephrases what he has just said. He does not seem to notice that the interviewers, by strategically positioning their accents, are attempting to direct his attention to significant point in the argument which they seem to think require more comments.

Research with British-resident South Asians in general, and other similar exchanges in the same set of

interviews indicate that such problems are not unique. By virtue of their communicative background, as native speakers of languages that employ other linguistic means to highlight information in discourse, South Asians often fail to recognize that accenting is used in English to convey key information, and thus do not recognize the significance of the interviewers contextualization areas. Furthermore, we know from ethnographic data the South Asian candidates have been socialized to expect interview practices that differ significantly from those the interviewers employ. They have learned to treat interview as hierarchical encounters, where candidates are expected to show reluctance to dwell on personal likes or preferences, and to what Gumperz (1992: 224) termed "avoid giving the appearance of being too forward or assertive". The consequences of the miscommunication that results becomes clear in the following segment when the instructor turns to the topic of the applicant's previous experience with electrical work:

- I. Instructor: What sorts of work have you done before in this particular field?
 j. Applicant: What do you mean please?
 K. Instructor: Well, electrical installation and maintenance. Some of it involves jobs done in your home. In your own home have you done work in your own home?
 L. Applicant: Yes sir.
 M. Instructor: Yeah, and what sorts of jobs have you done?
 N. Applicant: Well I-, I wired up my own house.
 O. Instructor: You have wired your own house?
 P. Applicant: Yeah.
 Q. Instructor: Yeah?
 R. Applicant: It is passed, by the authority, electricity board.
 S. Instructor: Yeah.
 T. Applicant: First time.
 H. Instructor: So having wired your own house, could you tell me what the "consumer box" is?
 V. Applicant: Yeah, where the fuses is.
 W. Instructor: Where the fuses are, all right. Have you done anything other than wiring your own house?

In data 1, it seems that the applicant is finally about to provide the much-needed information wanted by the interviewer. However, he evidently did not expect the instructor's question. Coming as it does after the applicant's statement, a native speaker would interpret it as a request for elaboration. But the applicant treats it as a "yes or no" question. And when the instructor

then questions his answer, the applicant changes topic. He does not understand that he is being asked to explain what the work he claims to have done involves. In data II, the instructor makes one more effort to test the applicant's knowledge. But the instructor gives only a local description of the term. From the other interview with the bricklayer, and this one involving the electrician, we know that when the interviewers change topic and ask about a specific technical term, they expect the applicant to use such questions as a point of departure from showing what they know about the work involved. We conclude therefore that the instructor is unimpressed with the information he has received and sees the applicant as a doubtful candidate. Although the applicant apparently has had quite a bit of experience doing electrical work, he has difficulty providing sufficient narrative detail to convince the interviewers that he has had relevant previous experience and is really interested in the course. In the end he does not gain admission. To identify some strengths and weaknesses of the theory of the interactional sociolinguistics, we will consider the Pupil Teacher exchange below from sociolinguistic goals.

Data 3

- A. Teacher: James, what does this word say?
 B. James: I don't know (with final rising intonation).
 C. Teacher: Well, if you don't want to try someone else will. Feddy?
 D. Feddy: Is that a "p" or "b"?
 E. Teacher: (Encouragingly) It's a "p"
 F. Feddy: Pen. 6. (Schiffrin, 11).

This teacher-pupil exchange is used to demonstrate how contextualization cues can affect the interpretation of a message. The teacher's response indicates that the teacher is interpreting James' "I don't know" not only according to literal meaning but also as suggesting that James does not want to try to answer the question. Schiffrin identifies James as an African-American. Gumperz (2001) points out that in African-American community, rising intonation conveys the desire for encouragement. Thus, the teacher according to view did not apply the contextualization presuppositions needed to accurately interpret James' message from his use of rising intonation.

In the pupil-teacher exchange there may be a miscommunication between the pupil's remark and the teacher's reply. The meaning of James's utterance, except if viewed as an avoidance, does not seem to be shared by both the teacher and him. In the data given however, interactional sociolinguistic approach falls short of giving the meaning of James' remark. The approach does provide a principle method by which

with further study of the reactions that James' "I don't know" receives in his usual cultural setting, conclusion could be drawn about the likelihood of what James meant. Empirical method could be employed to this. This will call for following James around in his community, for several days, pay attention to the intonation of such utterances as "I don't know", and conclude whether the utterance when made with rising intonation, elicit a response of encouragement. If such a response predominates in eliciting encouragement, we can assert that in his conversation with the teacher, James was in all likelihood seeking encouragement. However, this investigation does not show what James was thinking at the time, and this will again make the meaning of the utterance remain indeterminable unless another method of analysis that can tell us what he was thinking at the time. This will again lead us to ethnography of communication. It gives a methodology by which to discover what accounts as "communicative events".

Interactional sociolinguistics especially when complimented by elements from other approaches to discourse begins to provide a principal method by which the meaning of an utterance can be analyzed and interpreted. Under interactional sociolinguistics we begin to ask.

- i. What does James mean when he utters "I don't know"?
- ii. Why does the teacher respond the way she does in (c).
- iii. Why does the teacher encourage Feddy so nicely, but responded to James with dislike.

The rising intonation of James utterance can be interpreted as indicating a need for encouragement. The teacher on the other hand interpreted James rising intonation as not trying to attempt the question.

Unrecorded Interactional Conversation in Nigeria

The setting of the conversation is the Office of a Head of Department in Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria. The conversation is highlighted below:

Characters: Prof. (Head of Department), Mr. Onome (Junior Non – academic Staff)

(Mr. Onome knocks on the door and enters the HoD's office).

Mr. Onome: Good morning, Sir.

HoD: Ah, good morning, Mr. Onome. How are you doing?

Mr. Onome: (sighs) Sir, I'm not feeling too well.

HoD: Oh no, what's wrong with you? Fever or malaria?

Mr. Onome: (hesitates) Hmmmm, it's not that type of sickness, Sir. My mother is ill.

HoD: I see. I'm sorry to hear that. How is she doing? Has she seen a doctor?

Mr. Onome: Yes, Sir. But she'd like me to keep her company.

HoD: (smiling) Ah, I understand. You're asking for a bit of time off, I presume?

Mr. Onome: (nervously) Yes, Sir. Just a few days...

HoD: (chuckles) Mr. Onome, I can relate, but I can only grant you a day off. You have responsibilities here, and I'm sure your mother would want you to take care of yourself too.

Mr. Onome: (disappointed) Huuh, hmmm... Okay Sir. Thank you, Sir.

HoD: Don't worry, I'm sure your mother will be fine. Take care, and let's catch up later.

Mr. Onome: Thank you, Sir. (exits the office, looking unsatisfied).

The conversation highlights a classic and vivid example of cross-cultural miscommunication between the HoD, who operates within a Western-style academic culture, and Mr. Onome, who comes from a traditional Nigerian background. In many Nigerian cultures, family obligations are paramount, and caring for an ill family member is a moral imperative. When Mr. Onome says his mother is ill and needs company, he is implicitly requesting an extended leave to fulfill his filial duties. However, the HoD, operating within a Western-style academic framework, interprets this as a request for a brief absence.

The HoD's offer of a day off is seen as insufficient by Onome, who is torn between his cultural obligations and his professional responsibilities. The conversation reveals a clash between two cultural scripts: the individualistic, task-oriented approach of the academic institution and the collectivist, family-oriented values of Mr. Onome's cultural background. The HoD refuses to be swayed by Onome's antics and cultural/ethical affinity which presupposes him to show a higher level of understanding of the situation, rather he clung to his work ethics and values. Again, Mr. Onome's indirect request shows his cultural background of mutual respect for a boss, whom he assumed will interpret his request for a long absence owing to his mother's ill health. The HoD had expected him to be more direct with his request next time, perhaps. This miscommunication highlights the need for cultural sensitivity and awareness in academic institutions, particularly in multicultural settings like Nigerian universities. Effective communication requires understanding and respecting diverse cultural norms and values.

4. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion critically looks at key concepts/theories relevant to interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) and gave data as examples to support the issues raised in the concepts/theories. Sociolinguistics, study language in relation to society. As seen above, the intercultural encounters or clash, constitute an extreme case where participants represent historically and linguistically quite distinct traditions. All the participants had lived and worked in western industrial settings for much of their adult lives, but they imported into that different linguistic and cultural background experiences which continue to resonate in these encounters. While such examples are useful in illustrating how inferential processes are grounded in both linguistic and other background knowledge, they also show that the social outcomes and interactional consequences of communicative misalignment are greater than any single analysis can show.

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