

11 Interactional Sociolinguistics: A Personal Perspective

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0 Introduction: Background

Interactional sociolinguistics (IS) is an approach to discourse analysis that has its origin in the search for replicable methods of qualitative analysis that account for our ability to interpret what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice. It is well known that conversationalists always rely on knowledge that goes beyond grammar and lexicon to make themselves heard. But how such knowledge affects understanding is still not sufficiently understood.

My perspective on verbal communication is grounded in earlier work on ethnography of communication (Hymes 1961); Hymes's key insight was that instead of seeking to explain talk as directly reflecting the beliefs and values of communities, structuralist abstractions that are notoriously difficult to operationalize, it should be more fruitful to concentrate on situations of speaking or, to use Roman Jakobson's term, speech events. Events are arguably more concretely available for ethnographic investigation (Gumperz and Hymes 1964, 1972). They constitute units of interaction subject to direct analysis by established empirical means. At the same time, what happens in such events frequently enters into public discussion, so that replicable information on relevant beliefs and values can readily be obtained through focused ethnographic inquiry.

The ethnography of communication debate stimulated a wide variety of empirical investigations. These early studies and particularly the findings, which tended to be presented in terms of grammar-like rules of speaking of the form "in situation A do or say X" (Bauman and Sherzer 1976), have been convincingly criticized on the grounds that they cannot capture everyday practice (Brown and Levinson 1979; Bourdieu 1977, 1994). 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 the principal site for language and culture studies. As a result, research on language and culture has increasingly come to concentrate on discourse as the basic research site. Ethnographic insight gained through long-term, first-hand immersion in strategically selected fieldwork situations is applied to the interpretation of what

transpires in longer sequences and yields hypotheses on how native speakers think in everyday interaction. IS is one of several traditions concerned with these issues.¹

To look at talk as it occurs in speech events is to look at communicative practices. Along with others I claim that such practices constitute an intermediate and in many ways analytically distinct level of organization. A sociological predecessor here is Erving Goffman, who proposed the concept of "Interaction Order" as a distinct level of discursive organization bridging the linguistic and the social. Goffman's work on this topic has greatly influenced the conversational analysts' argument that conversation is separate both from grammar and from macro social structures and must be analyzed in its own terms. In my early approach to interaction I took a position situated somewhere between those of Erving Goffman (1981) and Harold Garfinkel (1967). The former looked at encounters from an ethologist's perspective, while the latter was concerned with the often overlooked interpretive processes that make interaction work. I argue that all communication is intentional and grounded in inferences that depend upon the assumption of mutual good faith. Culturally specific presuppositions play a key role in inferring what is intended.

Suggestive evidence to indicate that sociocultural background knowledge does in fact enter into everyday decision making comes from Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological experiments. Garfinkel sees interaction as constituted by goal-oriented moves, and his main concern is with the interpretive processes through which interactional outcomes are achieved. Based on a variety of illustrative examples taken from what he refers to as naturally organized situations, he argues that everyday talk can never be precise and detailed enough to convey what is really intended, so that interactants inevitably and necessarily rely on what he calls "practical reasoning" and unstated, taken-for-granted background knowledge to fill in for what is left unsaid. He goes on to point out that in so doing they display a built-in, deeply internalized, and for the most part un verbalized sense of social order. Yet apart from advocating that analysts resort to historical methods to trace how specific understandings come about so as to recover what types of knowledge are at work, Garfinkel gives no further specifics of how interpretive processes work in everyday talk.

It is the philosopher Paul Grice (1989) who lays the foundations for a truly social perspective on speaking, with his emphasis on conversational cooperation as a precondition for understanding. Arguing that communicating is by its very nature an intentional process, Grice goes on to develop a theory of meaning that brackets the traditional semanticists' concern with word-to-world relationships or denotation, to focus not on utterance interpretation as such, but on *implicature* – roughly, what a speaker intends to convey by means of a message. Grice coined the verb *implicate* to suggest that our interpretations, although often not closely related to context-free lexical meaning, are ultimately grounded in surface form. They are derived from what is perceptibly said through inference via processes of implicatures, processes that in turn rest on a finite set of general, essentially social *principles of conversational cooperation*. Grice cites a number of conversational examples, which show that situated implicatures often bear little denotational likeness to propositional or, loosely speaking, literal meaning. Exactly how Gricean principles of conversational implicature can be formulated more precisely is still a matter of dispute.

Garfinkel, by documenting the intrinsic incompleteness of everyday talk, and Grice, in claiming that listeners rely on assumptions about conversational cooperation to

recast what is literally said, each in his own way argues for the importance of extracommunicative knowledge in human understanding. But in contrast to other interpretivist perspectives, which seek to explain a particular action in terms of general, community-wide or pan-human norms or values, their perspective on interpretation is basically a dialogic one. The fundamental problem is not deciding on what an expression means but determining what a speaker intends to convey by means of a specific message. This view, that inferences are rooted in discourse as well as in the local circumstances in which they were produced, is by now widely accepted in discourse studies.

Goffman has given us the outline of a communicative perspective on the social world. In his earlier work he sets aside traditional analytical categories such as role, status, identity, and the like to concentrate on the phenomenal bases of interactive processes. Among the questions that concern him are: how can we distinguish among various possible kinds of face-to-face gatherings? What are the observable interactive signs by which we can describe the types of involvement that mark them? What kind of speaking roles can we identify in interaction and how are these marked at the level of behavior? What are the dialogic processes through which interactants display shared perceptions of who they are, manage interpersonal relationships, and otherwise position themselves vis-à-vis others? In later work he provides vivid illustrations to argue how interactions are framed in such a way as to relate the ongoing interaction to broader classes of encounters and make what transpires intelligible in terms of prior experience. Among other things, he points out that "framing" can be viewed as something like a filtering process through which societal-level values and principles of conduct are transformed and refocused so as to apply to the situation at hand. It follows that we can no longer think of community-wide beliefs and ideologies as directly revealed in talk. Interaction, he goes on to claim, should be seen as a separate level of communicative organization: thus the interaction order, which bridges the verbal and the social, must be analyzed in terms of its own analytical units both at the level of language and in interaction. His arguments thus foreshadow current thinking on communicative practice. However, Goffman provides only illustrative information to flesh out his methodological arguments. He is not concerned with how grammar and lexicon function both to frame what is being said and to affect situated assessments of what is conveyed at any one point in an encounter.

Conversational analysis as it is currently practiced began as an attempt to apply something akin to Goffman and Garfinkel's program to the study of everyday talk. A major initial goal was to show how the essentially social orderliness of even the simplest, most casual exchanges is produced, by focusing on the verbal "methods" conversationalists themselves employ in managing verbal exchanges. For the purpose of analysis, talk is treated as constituted by sequentially organized strings of speaking turns, such that by means of these turns conversationalists indicate the meaning of their actions and their understanding of prior actions (Goffman 1989). Relationships among turns are examined to demonstrate empirically how conversational effects are achieved. The term "empirical" is important here, since many conversational analysts use it to justify the claim that only overtly lexicalized propositional content counts as data, so that the indirect inferences that play such an important role in other forms of discourse analysis are excluded.

From an IS perspective the question we must ask is: how do we know what aspects of background knowledge are relevant at any one time, and is extracommunicative

background knowledge enough? We assume that information about contextual frames is communicated as part of the process of interacting, and therefore it becomes necessary to be clearer about the specifics of what happens in the interaction as such, to assess what is intended. Conversational analysts also set out to do this, and their work has brilliantly shown what can be learned through turn-by-turn sequential analyses. But I suggest that sequential analysis cannot by itself account for situated interpretation. It describes just one of the many indexical processes that affect inferencing. I argue that assessments of communicative intent at any one point in an exchange take the form of hypotheses that are either confirmed or rejected in the course of the exchange. That is, I adopt the conversational analysts' focus on members' procedures but apply it to inferencing. The analytical problem then becomes not just to determine what is meant, but to discover how interpretive assessments relate to the linguistic signaling processes through which they are negotiated.

1 Diversity as a Central IS Theme

A main IS theme is the inherent linguistic and cultural diversity of today's communicative environments. Research on the communicative import of diversity has been and continues to be plagued by deep theoretical divisions. On the one hand there are those who regard communicative practices as shaped by *habitus*: embodied dispositions to act and to perceive the world that directly reflect the macrosocietal conditions, political and economic forces, and relationships of power in which they were acquired (Bourdieu 1977, 1994). They argue that it is to such conditioning factors that we must look for insights into the nature of diversity. Others take a more constructivist approach, claiming that since our social worlds are ultimately shaped through interaction, it is necessary to begin by learning more about the way localized interactive processes work before we can turn to research on diversity. Since the two traditions differ in what they regard as relevant data and in the methods of analysis they employ, their findings are for the most part incommensurable.

IS seeks to bridge the gap between these two approaches by focusing on communicative practice as the everyday-world site where societal and interactive forces merge. Hanks (1996) defines communicative practice as largely resting on the discursive practices of actors acting in pursuit of their goals and aspirations. Therefore speaking, when seen in a practice perspective, is not just a matter of individuals' encoding and decoding messages. To interact is to engage in an ongoing process of negotiation, both to infer what others intend to convey and to monitor how one's own contributions are received. In other words, what is at issue is shared or nonshared interpretations rather than denotational meaning. And background knowledge of the kind I alluded to above, i.e. that goes beyond overt lexical information, always plays a key role in the interpretive process. IS analysis therefore concentrates on speech exchanges involving two or more actors as its main object of study. The aim is to show how individuals participating in such exchanges use talk to achieve their communicative goals in real-life situations, by concentrating on the meaning-making processes and the taken-for-granted, background assumptions that underlie the negotiation of interpretations.

As in-depth, discourse-level analyses of situated performances became available, it soon became evident that speech event categorizations cannot be treated as extralinguistically defined givens. More often than not, participants' definition of what the relevant event is and what it means in an encounter emerges in and through the performance itself (Bauman 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Hymes 1981). As Hanks puts it in an article on genre and related questions of language use: "The idea of objectivist rules is replaced by schemes and strategies, leading one to view genre as a set of focal and prototypical elements which actors use variously and which never become fixed in a unitary structure" (1987: 681, quoted in Bauman and Briggs 1990). What holds for the literary theorists' *genre* is true also for events (Gumperz 1982a). In both cases we are dealing with schemata or frames, embodying presuppositions associated with ideologies and principles of communicative conduct that in a way bracket the talk, and that thereby affect the way in which we assess or interpret what transpires in the course of an encounter. Presuppositions that over time come to be associated with specific events may be metonymically evoked, in the course of communicative practice, to set the criteria or establish frames in terms of which constituent messages are interpreted, a point that will be taken up later in this chapter.

The analytical issue thus shifts from the search for grammar-like rules of language use as traditionally conceived, to questions such as (1) how and by what signaling devices language functions to evoke the contextual presuppositions that affect interpretation, and (2) what presuppositions are at work in particular talk exchanges. Thus the IS approach to diversity is essentially a semiotic one, which allows for a shifting balance between multiple inputs. Such an approach accounts for the fact that what count as different systems at the level of denotational structures can come to convey information at the level of communicative structure.

IS assumes that interpretive assessments always build on local or context-specific background knowledge that takes the form of presuppositions that shift in the course of an encounter. Analysis focuses on *conversational inference*, defined as the interpretive procedure by means of which interactants assess what is communicatively intended at any one point in an exchange, and on which they rely to plan and produce their responses. Sequential positioning of turns at speaking is clearly an important input to conversational inference, but many other, analytically prior factors are also involved. Furthermore, it is also true that individuals engaged in conversation do not just react to literal meaning – if there is such a thing – in the linguist's sense of the term. At issue is communicative intent; to assess what is intended, listeners must go beyond surface meaning to fill in what is left unsaid. For example, if Tom had just been talking to Fred and I asked what they had been doing, he might answer "I asked Fred if he was free this evening." From this I might infer that he might be planning to join Fred in some activity, although literally speaking this is clearly not what the utterance "means."

My interpretation is of course not the only possible one. I relied on background knowledge acquired through past communicative experience to infer what was intended. To the extent that background knowledge is not shared, interpretations may differ. What the presuppositions are that enter into conversational inference and how they are reflected in talk vary, among other things, with speakers' and listeners' communicative background. Sharing of inferential procedures cannot be taken for granted; it must be demonstrated through ethnographically informed, in-depth analysis

of what transpires in an encounter. A main purpose of IS analysis is to show how diversity affects interpretation. Some of the best-known IS studies were conducted in urban workplace settings, where lay participants who are under great pressure to perform must deal with experts whose interpretive premises are quite different from theirs, and therefore operate with different background assumptions (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; Gumperz and Roberts 1991).²

The following brief extracts will illustrate some of the above points. They are taken from a set of selection interviews recorded in the mid-1970s in the British Midlands. The applicants are applying for paid traineeships at a publicly funded institution, offering instruction in skills that are in short supply:

(1) Electrician:

- a. *Interviewer:* have you visited the skills center?
- b. *Applicant:* yes, I did.
- c. *Interviewer:* so you've 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've got to live on for the period of time.

(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 brick shop?
- d. *Applicant:* ah yeah. we had a look around the brickshop.
and uhm, it look o.k. I mean it's- . . .
- e. *Interviewer:* all right.
- f. *Applicant:* pretty good yeah.

Note that while the interviewer asks roughly the same questions in each case, the two applicants differ in the way they answer and the treatment they receive. In (2) the applicant (the bricklayer) elaborates his answers, enabling the interview to judge how he has interpreted the question. The two participants actively collaborate 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. In (1), on the other hand, the applicant (the electrician) 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 it is she wants.

The electrician, although he has been living in Britain for a number of years, is South Asian by background, and the bricklayer 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 suggests 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 workplace climate. The latter part of this chapter will present a more detailed discussion of the electrician's interview, but first, more background on basic IS assumptions.

Initial insights into the role of language use in inferential processes came from studies of *code-switching* (Blom and Gumperz 1972), a term commonly used to refer to alternation among different speech varieties within the same event. Such alternations are employed throughout the world, particularly among participants in local networks of relationship. They are commonly described via rules of alternation similar in form to rules of language usage. For example, in the old Catholic church service Latin was said to be appropriate for prayer, while the native language was used for sermons. Yet if we examine switching as it enters into the discursive practices that constitute the event, it soon becomes apparent that it is not the objective situation that determines language use. The data show that the discursive juxtaposition of grammatically and lexically distinct ways of speaking in any one stretch of talk evokes a shift in contextual presuppositions which then in turn affects interpretation. As recent comparative empirical studies demonstrate (Auer 1998), code-switching constitutes a basic communicative resource that in many situations serves as a communicative strategy to achieve specific interpretive effects.

In IS analysis, speaking is treated as a reflexive process such that everything said can be seen as either directly reacting to preceding talk, reflecting a set of immediate circumstances, or responding to past events, whether directly experienced or indirectly transmitted. To engage in verbal communication therefore is not just to express one's thoughts. Speaking ties into a communicative ecology that significantly affects the course of an interaction. Conversational inference relies on two types of verbal signs: symbolic signs that convey information via the well-known lexical and grammatical rules and indexical signs that signal by direct association between sign and context. Terms like "here" and "there" or "this" and "that" are typical examples of indexicality, in that what is intended in any one instance can only be understood with reference to some physical or discursive environment. But context also can be and often is communicatively evoked through talk, and it is that evocation process that is at work in code-switching.

I use the term *contextualization cue* to refer to any verbal sign which, when processed in co-occurrence with symbolic grammatical and lexical signs, serves to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretation and thereby affects how constituent messages are understood. Code-switching is one such contextualization cue. Others include pronunciation along with prosody (i.e. intonation and stress), rhythm, tempo, and other such suprasegmental signs. Contextualization cues, when processed in co-occurrence with other cues and grammatical and lexical signs, construct the contextual ground for situated interpretation and thereby affect how particular messages are understood (Gumperz 1982a). As metapragmatic signs (Lucy 1993), contextualization cues represent speakers' ways of signaling and providing information to interlocutors and audiences about how language is being used at any one point in the

ongoing exchange. What sets them apart from communicatively similar lexicalized signs is that they are intrinsically oral forms. Since no utterance can be pronounced without such signs, contextualization cues are ever present in talk, and to the extent that they can be shown to affect interpretation, they provide direct evidence for the necessary role that indexicality plays in talk. Moreover, contextualization strategies signal meaning largely by cueing indirect inferences. In conversation, we could not possibly express all the information that interlocutors must have to plan their own contributions and attune their talk to that of their interlocutors, so it is easy to see the reason for this indirectness.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, indirect (not overtly lexicalized) signaling mechanisms are for the most part culturally or subculturally specific. In fact prosody and “accent” (in the sense of phonetically marked features of pronunciation), for example, are among the principal means by which we identify where people are from and “who” they are, and assess their social identity, as happened in the above examples. The reason we can do this is that contextualization strategies are learned primarily through direct personal contacts of the kind characteristic of family, peer-group, and close friendship relations, where background knowledge is likely to be shared and speakers can be confident that others will understand their indirect allusions.

I will give some additional concrete examples to show how I view the process of understanding. Some time ago, while driving to the office, my radio was tuned to a classical radio station. At the end of the program, the announcer, a replacement for the regular host who was scheduled to return the next day, signed off with the following words: “I’ve enjoyed being with *you* these last two weeks.” I had not been listening very carefully, but the extrastrong focal accent on “*you*” in a syntactic position where I would have expected an unaccented pronoun caught my attention. It sounded as if the announcer was talking to someone else. Yet there was no other person with him on the program. This led me to call on past communicative experience to construct an alternative, more plausible scenario which might suggest an interpretation. The speaker’s words reminded me of a leave-taking exchange, where a first speaker might begin with “I’ve enjoyed being with you” and the second might respond with “It was fun being with *you*.” I therefore inferred that the announcer, by accenting the personal pronoun as one would in the second part of the exchange, was actually implicating the first.

In the above examples, participants’ as well as my own interpretations relied on background knowledge to construct possible scenarios or envisionments or to intertextually retrieve specific expressions in terms of which the speakers’ words made sense. I use the term *activity type* or *activity* to refer to these evoked envisionments. My claim is that interpretation of communicative intent always – that is, not just in intercultural encounters – rests on such constructs. These imagined activities function like Goffman’s frames, abstract representations of the actions of actors engaged in strategically planning and positioning their moves in order to accomplish communicative ends in real-life encounters.

I am not claiming that IS analysis can solve the problem of interpretive ambiguity. The aim is to find likely solutions, i.e. solutions that are plausible in that they show how constituent actions cohere in light of the event as a whole, and the assumptions in terms of which we assess the event’s significance. This is of course quite different from determining the truth or falsity of specific interpretations. The method resembles

the conversational analyst's procedures of reconstructing the strategies members employ in formulating specific actions. But IS differs from conversational analysis in that the concern is with situated interpretation of communicative intent, not with strategies as such, and that analysis is not confined to overtly lexicalized information. Instead of taking interpretive processes for granted, IS analysis suggests (1) what the most likely interpretations are, (2) what the assumptions and inferential processes are by which they are achieved, and (3) how they relate to what is literally said.

In studies of intercultural and interethnic communication, IS methods have been useful in isolating systematic differences in interpretive practices that affect individuals' ability to create and maintain conversational involvement, and consequently to get their views across. This is specially true for today's culturally diverse institutional and workplace settings, where goal-oriented interaction plays a key role. As pointed out above, the issue is not merely what someone means at any one time, but shared interpretation. And such sharing always presupposes the ability to negotiate repairs, agree on how parts of an argument cohere, and follow both thematic shifts and shifts in presupposition. Apart from focusing on interpretations as such, IS analysis attempts to illustrate how these tasks are accomplished. It is for this reason that the analysis places so much stress on contextualization processes.

2 IS Method

In empirical studies, IS analysts have worked out a set of procedures along the following lines. First there is an initial period of ethnographic research designed to (1) provide insight into the local communicative ecology; (2) discover recurrent encounter types most likely to yield communicative data relevant to the research problem at hand; and (3) find out through observation, interviewing key participants, and checking one's own interpretations with them how local actors handle the problems they encounter and what their expectations and presuppositions are. In the second stage, the ethnographic findings provide the basis for selecting events reflecting representative sets of interactions for recording. (4) The next phase of the analysis begins with scanning the recorded materials at two levels of organization: (a) content and (b) pronunciation and prosodic organization. The aim is to isolate sequentially bounded units, marked off from others in the recorded data by some degree of thematic coherence, and by beginnings and ends detectable through co-occurring shifts in content, prosody, or stylistic and other formal markers. Extending the ethnographer of communication's practice somewhat, I use the term *event* to refer to such temporally organized units. The aim is to discover strips of naturally organized interaction containing empirical evidence to confirm or disconfirm our analyst's interpretations, evidence against which to test assumptions about what is intended elsewhere in the sequence.

Once isolated, events are transcribed and *interactional texts* (that is, transcripts that account for all the communicatively significant, verbal and nonverbal signs perceived) (Silverstein 1992) are prepared by setting down on paper all those perceptual cues: verbal and nonverbal, segmental and nonsegmental, prosodic, paralinguistic, and others that, as past and ongoing research shows, speakers and listeners demonstrably

rely on as part of the inferential process. This procedure enables us not only to gain insights into situated understandings, but also to isolate recurrent form–context relationships and show how they contribute to interpretation. These relationships can then be studied comparatively across events, to yield more general hypotheses about speakers’ contextualization practices.

Now let us return to the electrician’s interview, to show in more detail how the methodological principles outlined above work in analysis. This time a third person, the course instructor, joins in the questioning. In the first extract, the questioning is designed to test the applicant’s knowledge of the course:

- (3) a. *Interviewer*: and you’ve put here, that you want to apply for that course because there are more jobs in . . . the *trade*.
 b. *Applicant*: yeah (low).
 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 job in my- , as a 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 his reply to questions about his interest in electrical work. But just as he did in the previous example, the applicant is treating her remarks literally, as if he had 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 points in the argument which they seem to think require more comment.

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 cues. Furthermore, we know from ethnographic data that the South Asian candidates have been socialized to expect interview practices that differ significantly from those the interviewers employ. They have learned to treat interviews as hierarchical encounters, where candidates are expected to show reluctance to dwell on personal likes or preferences and avoid giving the appearance of being too forward or assertive (Gumperz 1996).

The consequences of the miscommunication that results become clear in the following segment, when the instructor turns to the topic of the applicant's previous experience with electrical work:

- (4) 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've 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.
 u. *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 fine. have you done *anything* other than wiring your own house?

In turn (n) it seems that the applicant is finally about to provide the information the interviewers need. But 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 turn (u) the instructor makes one more effort to test the applicant's knowledge. But the instructor gives only a lexical description of the term. From other interviews analyzed as part of this study, 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 for 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.

Altogether, the evidence we have shows that many native speakers of South Asian languages respond similarly whenever interviewers rely on prosody, formulaic expressions, or other indirect means to contextualize their questions. Moreover, initial interpretive differences tend to be compounded rather than repaired in the course of the encounter (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b, 1996). We could say linguistic diversity is the cause of the difficulty such minority candidates encounter, but that is too simplistic an explanation.

The three principals in this example have lived in the region for over a decade and, apart from the Asian's accent and minor grammatical oddities, they all speak English well. Moreover, they agree on what a selection interview is about and understand what is being said at the level of literal or denotational meaning. Both interviewers and interviewee rely on inferencing to interpret what is intended. But their inferences rest on different context-bound presuppositions, and they are therefore unable to agree on what is intended. The communicative difficulties are interactively produced. The interpretive processes involved are automatic and not readily subject to conscious recall, so that those involved are likely to be unaware of the discursive reasons for the misunderstandings. The question is one of differences in principles of communicative etiquette and of conventions of interpersonal communication. Such conventions are typically learned through informal personal contact. Because of the political and economic conditions in which they live, minority group members' access to such learning opportunities is likely to be quite limited.

But interpersonal contact alone does not explain the inferential leap from differences in discursive practices to judgments of ability. How can we explain the fact that the interviewers regard the candidate's seeming unresponsiveness and his failure to be explicit in expanding on his answers as evidence for lack of professional knowledge? We need to go beyond the local encounter, and look at societal ideologies in terms of which the interaction is assessed, to find an explanation. While it is true that overt discrimination against minorities in western industrialized societies has significantly decreased over the last few years, the language ideologies that associate control of the officially accepted standard language with basic ability continue to prevail (Irvine and Gal 1999). In this sense, we can say that the interviewer's assessment was ideologically based and did not necessarily reflect the interviewee's technical abilities or his real interest in the course.

By revealing the underlying interpretive process at work in an encounter, which is otherwise bound to remain hidden, IS analysis of key situations in institutional life can provide insights into the interpretive and ideological bases of communicative assessments, while at the same time enabling participants to learn from some of the difficulties arising in their contacts with others.

3 Conclusion

The intercultural encounters I have discussed 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 life, but they brought 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 far greater than any single analysis can show. As some of the shorter examples cited above indicate, IS analysis is applicable to communicative situations of all kinds, monolingual or multilingual, as a means of monitoring the communication processes that are so important in institutional life.

NOTES

- 1 For other related approaches see, for example, Bauman (1986); Briggs (1996); Fairclough (1995); Guenther (1993); Hill and Irvine (1993); Kallmeyer (1994); Sarangi and Roberts (1999); Sherzer (1983); Silverstein and Urban (1996); Tannen (1984, 1989); Young (1994).
- 2 For additional work on basic IS concepts, see Gumperz (1982b, 1992, 1996). For recent case study analyses see Gumperz (1998); Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1994, 1996).

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