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Individual and Social Differences in Language Use

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Social differences in language are those features of an individual's speech behavior which are shared by significant numbers of others and play a role in the signaling of common identity. The usual method of demonstrating this sharedness has been to focus on groups previously delimited by nonlinguistic criteria such as residence, class, or ethnic background and to isolate phonological, syntactic, or semantic indices which show a systematic relationship to the macro-sociological variables that partition such groups. Sociolinguists have argued that to study the social functioning of language the traditional methods of linguistic analysis which rely on long-term in-depth hypothesis testing between investigator and key individual informants should be abandoned in favor of survey techniques where large numbers of informants reply to predetermined lines of questioning. The claim is that only statistical abstraction from a broad sample enables the investigator to transcend variation due to personality traits and momentary performance characteristics.

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Survey approaches are very successful in characterizing language usage patterns of large populations and have made key contributions to the study of processes of change and diffusion, but they do not deal with the problem of social meaning, that is, the symbolic significance of alternate linguistic choices. Students of human interaction have long been aware that successful communication of any kind relies on shared symbolic systems which are learned through previous social interaction. It is through language that the sharedness of symbolic systems is recognized and signaled. That is, we rely on shared features of language both to assess what speakers are *doing* through talk and at the same time to make judgments about them. The basic question of how such micro-social evaluations relate to the macro-social characteristics of speech gleaned from statistical abstraction is as yet unresolved.

Furthermore, the correlation of linguistic variables with social variables has begun from the assumption that social groups are identifiable and known. This, however, is an issue much in dispute in the social sciences. That is, the question of what a social group or subgroup is has been very problematic, especially in urban areas, where much sociolinguistic work has focused. Secondly, the elicitation of valid information from large numbers of speakers is a vast problem, especially since it is crucial that responses truly reflect their habitual performance and knowledge rather than being an artifact of the interview situation. The more closely we study pragmatic meaning, the more disagreement arises about interpretation and appropriateness of utterances.

We would like to suggest a way of approaching the problems outlined which (a) avoids a priori identification of social groups, but rather builds on empirical evidence of conversational cooperation; and (b) extends the traditional linguistic method of in-depth hypothesis testing with key informants, to the process of conversational inference.

A key heuristic device in linguistic research has been the concept of "starredness." That is, to discover the grammatical rules of a language, the linguist compares acceptable and unacceptable sentences in order to make hypotheses about the knowledge that speakers rely on to derive meaning from words. To achieve an understanding of discourse strategies used in conversation, we have found it useful to compare what are in effect starred and unstarred discourse sequences. A starred sequence is one in which the smooth flow of conversation has been disturbed, or there is empirical evidence that a misunderstanding has occurred: Participants show signs of discomfort or annoyance, or otherwise give indications that communication has not been successful.

Our characterization of "unstarred," that is, successful communication, is derived from recent research on conversational cooperation by ethnomethodologists (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) and on conversational rhythm by students of nonverbal behavior (Erickson, 1975). This work has shown that successful communication requires subtle and

complex coordination of such elements as turn-taking, gaze direction, and establishment of rhythm. Speakers learn to use these conventions in the course of socialization through repeated interaction in the home and in networks of social relationships. Thus, to the extent that successful communication is characterized by smooth speaker change, establishment and maintenance of conversational rhythm over significant stretches of discourse, use and recognition of formulaic routines, and cooperation in the production of identifiable lines of thematic progression, to that extent it evidences shared systems of communication strategies. By contrast, when communication exhibits choppy turn-taking, lack of shared rhythm, failure to recognize and participate in formulaic routines, and inability to establish coherent thematic progression, it therefore may at times reveal differing systems of conversational strategies.

Our unit of analysis is a set of conversational exchanges which is sufficiently complete to provide a basis for applying the criteria outlined above. Ideally, we look for brief, thematically self-contained sequences; that is, sequences which, although they may be part of a larger interaction or sequentially discontinuous, nonetheless have identifiable beginnings, middles, and ends. Given knowledge of the outcome, we can then hypothesize about what contributed to it by looking at internal evidence in the form of utterances and responses. We obtain independent confirmation of our hypotheses by asking first participants and then others (a) how they interpreted utterances in the interchange; and (b) what linguistic features led them to their interpretations. This procedure furnishes concrete evidence for hypotheses about the ways in which speakers expect meaning to be communicated.

Thus we confront the problem of the symbolic significance of linguistic variables by discovering how they operate in interaction and how they serve to signal the interpretation of what is being done by the communicative act. Our hypothesis is that any utterance can be understood in numerous ways, and that people make decisions about how to interpret any given utterance or gesture based on their definition of what is happening at the time of interaction. In other words, they define the interaction in terms of a "frame" which is identifiable and familiar. We call these socially significant units of interaction *activity types*. This concept corresponds to the notions of "frame" as used by cognitive anthropologists, and "schema" or "script" as used by others in psychology and artificial intelligence (Tannen, 1979). We prefer the term "activity type" in order to emphasize that, although it is a structured ordering of event sequences and represents the speakers' expectations about what will happen next, yet it is not a "template," that is a static structure, but rather a dynamic, active process which develops and changes as the participants interact. Moreover, its basis in meaning reflects something being *done*, some purpose or goal being pursued (much as Bartlett, 1932, who originated the

stated that he preferred the term "active developing patterns"). Thus the activity type does not determine meaning but simply constrains it by channeling interpretation so as to foreground certain aspects of background knowledge and to underplay others.

Our basic assumption is that this channeling of interpretation is effected by conversational inferences based on conventionalized cooccurrence expectations between content and features of surface style. That is, constellations of surface features such as prosody, phonology, lexical choice, turn-taking conventions, interjections, idiomatic or formulaic usages, and so on, are the means by which speakers signal and listeners interpret how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows. We call these features "contextualization cues" (Gumperz, 1976, 1977). For the most part, they are habitually used and perceived but rarely consciously noted and almost never talked about directly. Therefore they must be studied in process and context rather than in the abstract. Habitual use of particular groups of these cues to communicate certain meaning and serve certain interactional goals makes up an individual's "conversational strategy." Thus, in our attempt to understand strategies we focus on the systematic use of cues in conversation and their effect on the interpretation of intent.

Our procedure involves

1. Playing a tape-recorded sequence of conversation to informants and then
2. Asking what a given portion of the discourse "means".
3. The informants are then asked what it was about the utterance in the conversation that led them to that interpretation.
4. They are then asked how it would have had to be said in order for a different interpretation to have been indicated.

Social boundaries can then be empirically determined, as a result of the data gathered, based on similarity of interpretations and agreement as to which aspects of the communication led to those interpretations. Systematic attention to certain linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of conversation then yields insight into the system of cuing meaning which is operating for people who agree on certain interpretations.

To demonstrate this procedure, we will present a number of natural conversation sequences. Our examples will be given in order of increasing divergence of communicative strategies. In each case we will identify the cues that are operating. At the end, we will distinguish between those that reflect individual differences as opposed to those that characterize differences in communicative and social background. Although misunderstandings, as our chosen linguistic site, is a correlate of the starred sentence, we are not interested in "right" and "wrong" interpretations, or even "appropriate" and "inappropriate" forms per se. Rather, by studying what has gone wrong when communication breaks down, we seek to under- stand

EXAMPLE 1: REGENT ST.

The following interchange took place during a telephone conversation between two friends, both educated professionals of East Coast urban backgrounds now living in California. A has called B on the telephone. B is in a university office.[1]

(1) A: Come here for dinner.
(2) B: OK. But I can only bring what I can pay for by check or credit card.
(3) A: That's a flimsy excuse!
(4) B: I can get something at the Coop.
(5) A: But that's out of your way.
(6) B: I'll go to your Coop.
(7) A: Never mind. Just come.
(8) B: It'll just take me 10 minutes to walk to the parking structure, then I'll leave.
(9) A: Oh, you have the car? I thought you were walking.
(10) B: Yes, I have the car.
(11) A: It's 2222 Regent Street.
(12) B: WHAT'S 2222 Regent Street?
(13) A: C's house. That's where I am.
(14) B: Oh! I thought you were home.

This is typical of misunderstandings which arise and are cleared up every day between friends and acquaintances. The trouble lay in different assumptions at the start of the conversation. When A said, Come here for dinner, he was assuming that here referred to C's house. Since this was not made overt, B was free to assume differently, that here referred to A's house. Both interpretations are reasonable, given each person's perspective.

As the conversation proceeded, both parties had difficulty maintaining their lines of reasoning. When B offered to buy something at the Coop supermarket, A was confused because he knew that this was not on her way to C's house. Therefore he said (5). As a result B also became confused, because she knew that the Coop was on her way to A's house. At this point both parties were aware that something was wrong, yet neither questioned the assumptions they had made. For one thing, B thought that A might be suggesting she not bring anything because she had said (2).

[1]We are aware of the fact that situated interpretation of any utterance depends on prosody, that is, intonation and stress, and paralinguistic features such as loudness, rhythm, and pitch register. Our insights into interpretation derive in large part from studies of just these features. Our analysis of examples relies on a system of transcription which captures these conversational aspects of prosody and paralinguistics. This system has been discussed elsewhere (Gumperz and Herasimchuk, 1972; Gumperz, 1977). In the present paper, how-

Thus there was an unlikely but plausible explanation for A's odd comment. With (7), A dismissed the misunderstanding, and they agreed to let it go and move to a new topic.

The second sign of trouble came when B referred to her car. A was startled because he was only a few blocks away from where she was. He therefore stated in (9) that he expected B to walk. But B knew that A's house was not within walking distance. The misunderstanding had proceeded to a second level, where each one sensed the other was saying very strange things. Still, this interchange also went uncorrected. B's utterance of (10) was a signal that this issue would stand as it was too.

Their respective lines of interpretation became untenable, however, when A uttered (11). At this point, B had no idea whatever what A was talking about. Only then did she voice her bewilderment (12). In response, A stated what he had assumed was understood all along: That he was at C's house (13). B also stated what her erroneous assumption had been (14). This cleared up the misunderstanding.

This misunderstanding could be easily repaired, because the participants had made different choices between alternate interpretations which both could easily understand. It is interesting to see how much odd verbal behavior they were willing to put up with, before they talked about what was wrong. Rather than question their assumptions, they tried to twist the other's strange comments into a meaning that made sense. Only when this was no longer possible, did they make their assumptions overt and have the chance to see what had gone wrong. The explanation about where *here* referred to in (1) satisfied both parties, and the misunderstanding was over. In this example, there is no detectable difference in signaling systems; the problem lies in the inherent ambiguity of deictic words.

EXAMPLE 2: YOGURT DRESSING

Other misunderstandings, however, are not attributable to simple semantic ambiguity. Consider, for example, the following interchange which took place between two close friends, both East Coast urban professional men living in California. In this example, the participants were of different religious and ethnic backgrounds. A was preparing dinner.

(15) A: *What kind of salad dressing should I make?*
(16) B: *Oil and vinegar of course.*
(17) A: *What do you mean "of course"?*
(18) B: *Well, I always make oil and vinegar, but if you want we could try something else.*
(19) A: *Does that mean you don't like it when I make other dressings?*

(20) B: *No. I like it. Go ahead. Make something else.*
(21) A: *Not if you want oil and vinegar.*
(22) B: *I don't. Make a yogurt dressing.*
(23) A: *mm.*

(A prepares yogurt dressing, tastes it, and makes a face).

(24) B: *Isn't it good?*
(25) A: *I don't like yogurt dressing.*
(26) B: *Well if you don't like it, throw it out.*
(27) A: *Never mind.*
(28) B: *What never mind? It's just a little yogurt!*
(29) A: *You're making a big deal about nothing!*
(30) B: *YOU are!*

This misunderstanding ended in frustration and anger for both participants. Whereas in Example 1 the two participants made different assumptions about the referent of the deictic *here*, in Example 2, A and B had different ways of using directness and indirectness strategies. Therefore their efforts to repair the miscommunication only led to further misunderstandings of each other's intent. Of course this interchange, like all human encounters, did not occur in isolation but was influenced by both participants' moods, their previous experience with each other and with others that day and, in some sense, every day of their lives; a myriad of social and emotional factors bear upon every interchange. Nonetheless, what we want to look at is the form that the interaction takes, regardless of what emotional and other pressures led to it.

The first sign of trouble occurred when B said *of course* in (16). A indicated he not understand what this "meant," that is, what B intended to convey. However, when A asked for clarification, things did not get cleared up at all. B attempted in (18) to explain what he had meant by *of course* in (16): an ironic comment on his own habitual eating patterns, and he tried to make it clear that it was fine with him if A made another kind of dressing.

Not every speaker of English will recognize (16) as ironic. However, this interpretation is possible for many, especially those familiar with New York style. This is an example of a situation in which the analyst can reconstruct what seems like a plausible interpretation and then check it with participants. In the case of Example 2, Speaker B readily identified that (16) was an ironic response. As always, the interpretation is inextricably bound to the precise way in which the phrase was uttered, but the ironic inflection and its interpretation are meaningful only to those familiar with its symbolic significance. The very fact that such an interpretation is obvious to some and inconceivable to others is the kind of evidence we are concerned with in the present study.

To continue with our analysis: A did not (perhaps was unable to) understand *of course* as ironic; he thought it indicated that B perferred oil and vinegar. At this point, B began to realize that A did not understand his intentions. He tried to convince A that he should feel free to make something else (20). Note that (20) constitutes an intensification of the direct strategy B had used in (18). Now his direct statement has become an imperative: *Make something else*.

A, however, was still operating under his initial assumption that *oil and vinegar* expressed B's preference. Therefore he felt B was now veiling that preference in order to avoid hurting A's feelings. In a manner suggestive of what Bateson (1972) calls "complementary schismogenesis," A became more insistent on not making a different dressing (21). To make it abundantly clear that this was not his preference in fact, B "suggested" that A make a yogurt dressing, as proof of B's good faith. He intended *yogurt dressing* to stand for "something other than oil and vinegar." A however took (22) as another order; he understood *yogurt dressing* as representing "yogurt dressing." In the face of what he perceived as a demand from B, he did not voice the fact that he did not like that type of dressing.

A was now annoyed at B for telling him to make a kind of dressing A did not like. A had shown utmost consideration for B's preferences, and now B was being selfish and inconsiderate, from A's point of view. Only when A made a face after tasting the dressing did B learn that he did not like it. He then told him (26). This was even more confusing to A. First B ordered him to prepare it; then he ordered him to throw it out. Inferring that B was being capricious and domineering, A resisted complying. B saw that A had inexplicably refrained from telling the obviously relevant information about his not liking yogurt dressing and, furthermore, had stubbornly refused to rectify the situation by throwing it out. Both ended up thinking the other irrational, stubborn, difficult, and unwilling to cooperate.

B's strategy was based on the expectation that A would state his preferences without being asked. Furthermore, he expected A to take literally B's attempt to go "on record," in Brown and Levinson's (1977) sense, by lexicalizing his intent, once a misunderstanding had arisen over his use of *of course*. A continued to operate on a strategy that assumed that a preference once stated had to be honored, and therefore B would not directly state his preferences, even when pushed (see Tannen, 1975, for numerous examples and discussion of miscommunication due to directness–indirectness differences).

Although our line of argumentation may at times have the ring of literary exegesis, we do not intend our analysis to be a running account of what the text "means," but rather to suggest plausible paraphrases which make clear the operation of differing strategies and to show the signaling devices which may underlie the participants' interpretations of each other's utterances.

Applying our method of recovering expectations by subsequent questioning, we asked A what he had expected in response to (15). He told us, "Oh, something like 'Make whatever you like' or 'How about something creamy?'" In other words, he expected a kind of negotiation in which both would indirectly express preferences until a decision was reached. He did not expect to be told what to make. Therefore B's answer, *oil and vinegar*, was unexpected and A could not "understand" it. B, on the other hand, said he did not intend his response (16) as a demand. It was his ironic way of saying "Make whatever you like." B reiterated his incredulity that A did not express his dislike for yogurt dressing.

Patterns of signaling indirectness are habitual styles of communication or communication strategies, which, while they are matters of individual choice, are nonetheless influenced by family and regional background. Usages such as *of course* in the preceding example are acquired while growing up and through peer group interaction. Perhaps it is significant that A in the above example is from Boston, while B is from New York City, and that A is Catholic and B is Jewish. However, the relationship between background and habitual strategies has yet to be determined.

EXAMPLE 3: PARTY

In the above example, the fact that something was wrong was clear to both participants, to the extent that both felt frustrated and dissatisfied with the other's behavior. There are many instances, however, when both people think they correctly understood each other and that their communication was effective, but in fact their interpretations of what took place are quite different. In Tannen (1975) the following interchange between a husband and wife is reported:

(31) A: *John's having a party. Wanna go?*
(32) B: *OK.*
(33) A: (Later) *Are you sure you wanna go?*
(34) B: *OK. Let's not go. I'm tired anyway.*

At the end of this interchange, the couple did not go to the party, and both felt satisfied. However, each one thought that not going was a favor to the other. Although the participants agreed on what was being done—deciding whether to go to the party—they differed about how they expected that activity to be carried out interactionally. Perhaps A intended the opener (31), much as A in the yogurt dressing example intended his initial question, that is, the initiation of an exchange in the course of which they would jointly arrive at a decision based on preferences which would be indirectly expressed. B, however, interpreted question (31) as

indicating that A wanted to go. Therefore, he agreed to do what she wanted and said OK.

Perhaps A was uncomfortable because the type of negotiation she had expected never took place. She asked if B was sure (33). B took her bringing it up again as an indication that she did not want to go. Therefore he agreed not to go, for her sake. Furthermore, he wanted her to feel comfortable about his giving in to her, so he said that he was *tired anyway*. A, however, now had even more evidence that he was telling her what he really wanted. That is, he was tired. In fact there are possible indications in *OK* and *anyway* that B is acquiescing; however, as has been seen in the other examples, people rarely question the indirect contextualization strategies that the other is using. They make an interpretation and stick to it and will ignore considerable discrepancies between their expectations and the other's behavior, unless and until those discrepancies become so extreme that they can no longer be integrated into participants' lines of reasoning.

EXAMPLE 4: WHO'S THE ARTIST?

In the preceding examples, the people communicating (or failing to) came from what ordinarily would be considered similar class or cultural backgrounds. When people from more obviously divergent backgrounds communicate, misunderstandings have similar effects, but their linguistic bases can be quite different.

When a house painter arrived at the home of a middle class couple in California, he was taken around the house to survey the job he was about to perform. When he entered a spacious living room area with numerous framed original paintings on the walls, he asked in a friendly way, "Who's the ARtist?" The wife, who was British, replied, "The painter's not too well-known. He's a modern London painter named—." The housepainter, looking puzzled, said, "I was wondering if someone in the family was an artist."

In this sequence, the misunderstanding did not have significant consequences. First of all, it was part of a casual encounter between strangers which was not expected to result in any action. Furthermore, the speakers were aware of the dissimilarity in backgrounds because of the differences in their "accents."

"Who's the ARtist?" is a formulaic comment that fits a paradigm often uttered by Americans being escorted around a house. That is, one might just as well say, "Who's the COOK?" on seeing a panoply of kitchen utensils on a pegboard, or "Who's the GARdener?" on looking out the window and seeing rows of tilled earth with seed packages on sticks in the ground. Such formulae often are a conventionalized way of fulfilling the expectation that a complimentary comment be made upon seeing someone's house for the first time. The compliment in the formulaic paradigm generally initiates a routine in which the addressee indirectly acknowledges the indirect compliment by saying, for example, "It's just a hobby," or "I'm just a fan," or making some other self-deprecatory remark, in response to which the compliment is reasserted: "But they're really very good." The British wife in the above example was not familiar with this paradigm and its attendant routine, and therefore took the housepainter's question to reflect an objective interest in the art work. The questioner's puzzled look after her response was an indication that his question had not been understood as intended.

In recent years, linguists have come to recognize that, as Fillmore (1976) puts it, "an enormously large amount of natural language is formulaic, automatic, and rehearsed, rather than propositional, creative, or freely generated [p. 9]." As sociolinguists, we want to know how the formulaic nature of utterances is signaled. In the example given here, there are both extralinguistic and linguistic cues. The extralinguistic signals lie in the setting and the participants' knowledge of what preceded the interaction. There are at least three linguistic signals: first, the semantic content; second, the syntactic paradigm; and third, the contextualization cues such as prosody (for example, the stress and high pitch on the first syllable of "ARtist," and its marked high falling intonation). The contextualization cues here alert the listener to the possibility of a formulaic interpretation, even if the specific utterance has never been heard before. Formulaic use of language is always a problem for non-native speakers or visitors to a foreign country. It is perhaps even more of a danger, however, between people who ostensibly speak the same language but come from different social or regional backgrounds. Since they assume that they understand each other, they are less likely to question interpretations.

EXAMPLE 5: HOW'S THE FAMILY?

The following conversation is reported in Gumperz (1976). A student, B, has called a faculty member, A, on the telephone.

(35) A: *Hello.*
(36) B: *How's the family?*
(37) A: *Fine.*
(38) B: *I'll get back to you next month about that thing.*
(39) A: *That's OK. I can wait.*
(40) B: *I'm finished with that paper. It's being typed.*
(41) A: *Come to the office and we'll talk about it.*

When A later refused to give B a grade without seeing the typed paper, B was annoyed, saying A was being inconsistent. B believed A had agreed to give him special consideration.

In this interchange, it had seemed strange to A that B did not begin with a greeting ("Hi") and self-identification ("This is . . ."). Whenever verbal behavior seems strange, it may be a clue that a different strategy is being used. Again, we asked participants and others to comment on the interchange. While many simply called the omission of a greeting "odd," others identified it as semantically significant. They suggested that B was using the omission to establish familiarity, and that he therefore might be asking for a favor. All these commentators were Black or had had a great deal of close social contact with Blacks. Many also spontaneously recalled personal encounters where the same technique had been used with different words for similar purposes.

A's failure to recognize the routine led to the misunderstanding. When the student and other Black informants were asked how the professor could have signaled unwillingness to give B special consideration, they said he would in that case not have answered the question, "How's the family?" Instead, he would have responded with another question, such as, "What do you want?"

In this example, it is clear that the formulaic omission of a greeting is ethnically specific; only those people familiar with urban Black culture recognize the routine. One might ask why someone would use an ethnically specific routine in an interaction with others who are not members of that "group." The fact that they do is evidence of the automatic nature of linguistic strategies. Whether or not the strategies are limited to certain groups is a matter for posthoc analysis, of which the present study is a first step.

Although the professor failed to recognize the verbal routine, his response, on the surface, was entirely appropriate, and conversation proceeded. In some cases, however, lack of familiarity with conventionalized rhetorical devices and consequent failure to recognize cues associated with them can lead to obstruction of conversational flow. This can be seen in the following example.

EXAMPLE 6: THE FINGERS OF THE HAND

Five graduate students of varying backgrounds were videotaped discussing a first-year graduate course. A difference of opinion had developed concerning the need for the course to integrate various approaches to anthropology. One of two male students in the group argued that, given the complexity of research in the field, such integration was no longer possible. Three women students, on the other hand, maintained that the connection still existed and therefore should be brought out. One of these women attempted to summarize their line of argument. Notice when she was interrupted by her friend:

(42)   A: *It's like all parts of the hand. The fingers operate independently,*
       ⌈ *but they have the same . . .*
(43)   B: ⌊ *What I would like to say is . . .*

The videotape clearly shows that A was disconcerted by B's interruption. She turned suddenly to B and uttered an expression of frustration.

When the participants in this discussion viewed the tape, B insisted that she had agreed fully with what A had said, but she had thought A was finished, and therefore had taken a turn to talk. A asserted that she had been interrupted just when she had been about to make her point based on the simile she had introduced. It may be relevant to note at this point that A is Black, from an inner-city neighborhood in Northern California, and the extended simile she was using is recognized by those familiar with Black rhetoric as fitting a formulaic paradigm for summing up an argument or commenting on what someone had said.

Elsewhere in the same discussion, A made another statement which fits a formulaic paradigm: "You hear one thing, and you read another." One indication of the formulaic nature of this expression lies in the fact that in in-group conversation only the first part of such a sequence is uttered; that is, one would say, "You hear one thing," or "It's like all parts of the hand," and stop at that, relying on the hearers' cultural knowledge to supply the rest. Our examples, however, arose in a mixed group session, and we see that A intended to complete the simile. Her intonation rose on *independently* (42), signaling that she was going to continue, and presumably any native speaker of American English would have known from this signal that she was not relinquishing the floor. While she has spoken English most of her life, B is from India. Studies we have made of in-group talk among speakers of Indian English have shown that prosodic and paralinguistic cues operate quite differently in Indian English (Gumperz *et al.*, 1978) and other varieties of English.

While different rhetorical strategies can lead to misunderstandings, cross-cultural differences, which consist of more generalized discrepancies in use of prosody and paralinguistic cues, can lead to the disruption of conversational rhythm and thematic progression. Throughout the videotaped discussion under consideration, B interrupted much more than the other participants, despite her subsequent assertion that she did not intend to do so; moreover, she was frequently interrupted by the others, who also later asserted that they had thought she was through.

EXAMPLE 7: A GIG

The following example, which took place after an ethnically mixed class, illustrates both the risks and the benefits derived from the use of shared conventions.

Student A approached his professor, B, who was surrounded by other Black and White students and said, "Could I talk to you for a minute? I'm gonna apply for a fellowship and I was wondering if you would give me a recommendation?" After the professor responded favorably, the student turned ever so slightly to take in the group as a whole and said, "Ahma git me a gig." (Rough gloss: 'I'm going to get myself some support.') Linguistically, this last sentence contrasted with the first. It represented a shift to Black phonology ("Ahma," "git," and the long [I] followed by an off-glide in [gI:g]). The prosody and tune also gave the sentence a singsong rhythm. Informants familiar with Black speech styles recognized this as a formulaic utterance. When asked to interpret it, they suggested that A's manner of saying this was a way of alluding to the dilemma often discussed among Blacks of having to get support from the establishment. The speaker was capitalizing on this shared system to justify his behavior in the eyes of his fellow-students, even though he was violating what some perceive as the constraint against using dialect in an academic setting. Many white informants, in fact, had difficulty interpreting A's remark. Unable to identify it as formulaic, they simply thought it was a lapse into the speaker's conversational style, and suggested that he was turning away from the rest of the group and addressing only the other Black students. In fact, this was not his "normal style" at all. Correct identification of the utterance as a formulaic routine depends on knowledge of a whole range of phonological and prosodic variables, as well as expectations about their cooccurrence.

EXAMPLE 8: I DON'T WANNA READ

In a taped elementary school classroom session, the teacher told a student to read aloud. The student responded, "I don't wanna read," using an intonation pattern marked by raised pitch on "I" and a drawn-out fall–rise on "read." The teacher got annoyed and said, "All right, then, sit down."

When this interchange was played to others, some said that the child was being uncooperative. Others said the child meant, "Push me a little and I'll read. I can do it, but I need to know that you really want me to." This latter group interpreted the child's statement, "I don't wanna read" in somewhat the same way as those judges who interpreted the wife's question in Example 3 ("Are you sure you want to go to the party?") as meaning that she would prefer not to go. The difference is, first, whereas

Whites generally opt for the "refusal" interpretation in the present example, Black informants generally favor the "encourage me" interpretation. Second, those who choose the latter interpretation agree that it is the child's rising intonation at the end of his sentence that led to their conclusion, and many of them furthermore volunteer the information that if the child had intended to refuse, he would have stressed "want." The two possible intonation contours, then, form a contrast set for a group of informants. On the other hand, the indirect interpretation of the wife's question in Example 3 was justified in numerous different ways by different speakers.

Just as the husband misunderstood his wife's intent and thought she was hinting that she didn't want to go, so the teacher in this example misunderstood the child's intent and thought he was refusing to read outright. She did not perceive the intonation as a significant signal; rather, she reacted to the semantic content alone and became annoyed.

The same pattern can be seen in many interchanges in which rising intonation is used in this way by speakers who employ this system. For example, note the following classroom interchange.

EXAMPLE 9: I DON'T KNOW

(44) T: *James, what does this word say?*
(45) J: *I don't know.*
(46) T: *Well, if you don't want to try someone else will. Freddy?*
(47) F: *Is that a "p" or a "b"?*
(48) T: (encouragingly) *It's a "p."*
(49) F: *pen.*

Sentence (45) was spoken with rising intonation, and therefore, in the child's system at least, implied, "I need some encouragement." The teacher missed this and thought James was refusing to try. The question in (47), in effect, had the same "meaning" (communicative function) as (45): "I need some encouragement." However, Freddy communicated his hesitance in a way the teacher expected, so she furnished that encouragement (48), and Freddy proceeded. Witnessing this interchange, James then "saw" that the teacher was willing to encourage Freddy but not him. He therefore may have logically concluded that she was "picking on him" or "prejudiced against him."

EXAMPLE 10: A BRIDGE

Our last example comes from the same discussion among graduate students as Example 9. At this point, the main topic has been the failure of

the course program to show the relationship between linguistic anthropology and social anthropology.

(50) A: *But if you took a core that was designed by the linguistics department and one by the sociocultural, and both of them had Boas there would be some connection. Then why is it important in both areas? What's the difference? and I*

(51) B: *Do you think it's because people in sociocultural sort of monopolize the field?*

(52) C: *Wait a minute wait a minute*

(53) A: *You pick what you need, you don't pick up the whole package. You pick out what YOU need. You don't need the whole box.*

(54) D: *Both of them are justified. Anthropologists have their own emphasis, linguists have their own emphasis and . . . but ah there is no connection. What we need is a bridge ah . . .*

(55) C: *Maybe the problem is that there is no faculty person that really has that oversight*

D finished a sentence and followed it by *ah . . . .* Then C took a turn to speak. Speakers of American English do not see C's contribution as an interruption. D, however, seemed annoyed at this point, and when viewing the tape afterward, he commented that he had been interrupted and prevented from making his point. D, who is Indian, further stated that this happened to him continually with Americans. Up until the time C broke in (55), D had simply repeated what had been previously said. Later on in the discussion, he did succeed in making his point, which was that, to be successful, the course should be built on a common intellectual foundation. He made it, however, only when an outsider intervened and asked each participant to state his own opinion in turn.

An examination of D's use of prosody shows that the way he signaled relationships between clauses in longer stretches of discourse differed significantly from American conventions. D's second and third statements in (54) were intended to contrast with each other; he was saying that anthropologists and linguists have different emphases. Since he used the same syntax and lexicon in both statements, the Americans would not hear these as contrasting unless he differentiated them through prosody (e.g., contrastive stress on *their*). D, however, used the same stress pattern on both sentences. The Americans, using their own system, perceived this as simply "listing." D's next two sentences were: *but there is no connection. What we need is a bridge.* Here he put what sounds to Americans like emphatic stress on *connection, we,* and *bridge.* Americans are therefore likely to assume, as C did, that these two sentences represent D's main point.

Our studies of other conversations in which all participants are of

Indian background reveal at least two rhetorical devices which operate differently from those typically used by Americans:

1. In making an argument, Indian speakers take great care to formulate the background for what they are going to say.
2. They use increased stress to signal that this is background information, then shift to low pitch and amplitude on their own contribution.

The strategy behind the cue is something like raising one's voice to get attention, then stating one's message in a low voice.

In our example, D apparently expected to be listened to attentively because he had used the repetition plus stress cues to set the stage for his contribution. Nonetheless, he was interrupted, since his American interlocutors did not share his system of signaling and therefore did not expect anything important to follow. The tragic outcome of such signaling differences lies in the judgments made by participants and observers about the intellectual quality of conversational contributions. As it stands, D's contribution sounds unoriginal, repetitive, and not logically connected. In fact, he never got to make his point at all.

CONCLUSION

All our examples involve mistaken judgments of others' conversational intent. Everywhere these misreadings were the result of different interpretations of verbal and nonverbal cues. The linguistic nature and interpretive effect of the cues, however, change progressively as the list proceeds.

In Example 1 (Regent St.), and to some extent in Example 2 (Yogurt dressing), the misunderstanding hinged on lexical interpretation. When commenting on Example 1, all informants could easily accept the possibility of both interpretations. The effect is like the changing focus of a camera lens or a picture that can be seen alternately one way or another. In contrast, when commenting on Example 2, some informants could easily accept both the literal and the ironic interpretations of *of course,* while to others the literal interpretation was the only plausible one. Furthermore, some informants understood "How's the family?" in Example 5 as the possible start of a certain kind of routine, and those same informants recognized that a negative statement spoken with rising intonation in response to situated requests such as those in Examples 8 and 9 can mean "I am pushable." Other respondents, on the other hand, could only see that a greeting had been oddly omitted in Example 5 and that the child was being uncooperative in Examples 8 and 9.

In the examples involving Indian speakers, moreover, the differences in use of contextualization cues operate on a more general level of interac-

tion. They reflect prosodic and rhetorical signals which are directly attributable to differing language backgrounds and influence all aspects of individuals' speech. The differences profoundly affect their participation in conversation.

To recapitulate our discussion, our assumption has been that conversational inference is based on knowledge of (a) semantic content; and (b) habitual use and perception of surface cues which make up discourse strategies. The way these features combine to signal meaning is a matter of convention learned through previous interaction. We are returning, then, to Sapir's hypothesis that there is a direct relationship between the kind of individual cues used by speakers and the amount and kind of social interaction they have experienced. Note, moreover, that while the linguistic phenomena involved here are those studied by linguists, their communicative effect is felt at the level of conversational inference rather than the level of sentence meaning.

We suggest investigation of miscommunication as a way of recovering shared sociocultural knowledge used in conversation. In each case we ask, first, what one has to know to arrive at the interpretation made by participants or others and, second, at what level of language the signaling takes place. Our analysis yields a tentative hierarchy of signaling differences which corresponds to the subtle distinction between individual and social differences in language use.

We have found four levels of signaling differences:

1. Differing assumptions, leading to different ways of exploiting the inherent indeterminacy of verbal signals (Example 1)
2. Differences in broad strategies of operating within a shared system (e.g., types of indirectness) (Examples 2 and 3)
3. Differences in shared routines and formulaic paradigms signaled in similar ways (Examples 4, 6, 8, and 9)
4. Differences in basic contextualization conventions for signaling pragmatic salience (e.g., given and new), thematic progression, and expressiveness (Examples 6, 7, 10, and to a lesser extent 8 and 9)

The degree to which conversational cooperation is obstructed is a function of where in this hierarchy the differences occur. It is assumed that this is an implicational hierarchy, so that people with differences at Level (4) can be expected to have difference in Levels (1), (2), and (3) as well.

Level (4) differences correspond to the kinds of gross intercultural communication difficulties, as seen in Examples 6 and 10, when the Indian and American students were unable to judge when others had made their main points. Generally, in the case of Level (4) differences, ability to establish conversational rhythm, to effect smooth turntaking, to cooperate in the establishment of thematic progression, are severely impaired. Level

(3) is perhaps most typically the level of differences resulting from divergent ethnic backgrounds in modern urban societies. While miscommunications on all levels result in misunderstanding of the other's intent, conversational cooperation can still be maintained in Level (3) situations and therefore can lead to the even more disconcerting situation in which all participants erroneously believe that they have communicated successfully.

Examples 5 and 6 both contain instances in which people failed to recognize the other's use of a conventional routine. However, in the case of Example 5, (How's the Family?), where participants shared Level (4) cueing conventions, the professor was able to participate in the conversation in a way that had a semblance of cooperation. In Example 6 (The Fingers of the Hand), however, participants differed at Level (4), so the result was disruption of conversational rhythm in the form of interruptions. Someone who differed from the Black speaker on Level (3) and consequently failed to understand that a conventionalized simile was being invoked, might yet have realized that rising intonation indicated the speaker was not finished.

Our initial analysis focuses on specific conversations in context which generate hypotheses to be tested through further, more structured investigation. The crucial element of our method is that it studies interaction itself and gleans information about similarities and differences from a combination of direct observation of the data and intensive interviewing. The questioning of informants and participants about the sources of their interpretations furnishes a way to recover ordinarily unverbalized expectations.

Since responses to contextualization cues are automatic, and since talking about them (or "metacommunicating," to use Bateson's term) is almost never done, misunderstandings such as the ones discussed generally lead to conclusions not about the other perons's use of language but about his ability or intentions. This has been seen in all our examples.

To further complicate matters, inferences drawn from indirect interpretation of cues seem as "real" as those drawn from what is directly said. In retrospect, one often recalls as having been stated what at the time was inferred. Thus the husband and wife in Example 3 later had an argument in which one asserted, "We didn't go to the party because you didn't want to. You SAID you didn't want to go." The other countered "I did not. I said I wanted to. You said YOU didn't want to." To "say" something and to communicate it indirectly become merged in retrospect, both having "meaning" for the speaker and hearer in the same way.

This theory goes far to explain what has hitherto been labeled prejudice and clannishness—the tendency to feel more comfortable with those who share one's communicative system, and to perceive those people who

communicate differently as having suspect intentions and negative personality traits. Thus the study of contextualization phenomena may give insight into how groups are formed, and how and why linguistic differences are maintained. Ultimately, and hopefully, these methods may, to paraphrase D in Example 10, build a bridge between macro-sociolinguistic measurement of linguistic variables and the psycholinguistic study of interpersonal relations.

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