Interactional Sociolinguistics as a resource for Intercultural Pragmatics

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The link between interactional sociolinguistics (IS) and intercultural pragmatics (ICP) is a close and obvious one. Both fields are concerned with how language conveys meaning *in interaction*; both regard the process by which language does so as dynamic, emergent, and resulting from the interaction of participants rather than from the single-handed linguistic production of individual speakers; and for both, the language of intercultural interaction is key. However, whereas this latter focus is constitutive of the field of ICP, it is, in a way, a heuristic for IS; that is, IS researchers tend to focus on intercultural interaction because the ways in which language works to create meaning in interaction stand out in relief when expectations regarding their use are not shared, and intercultural interaction provides a research site in which such expectations are typically not shared. That is why the discourse analysis of audio- or videotaped intercultural interaction is the bedrock of IS methodology, and its theoretical foundation is the notion that expectations and conventions regarding ways of signaling meaning are automatic and culturally relative. These methodological and theoretical foundations reflect the primary goal of IS: to understand how language works to create meaning in interaction. Yet for many IS practitioners, another goal is to account for the role played by linguistic processes in intercultural encounters, especially when those encounters involve social inequality, discrimination, or mutual stereotyping. For these practitioners, the intercultural encounter is not a heuristic but, as it is for ICP, a defining research site.

In his foundational research whereby he founded IS, Gumperz (1982) demonstrated that systematically different ways of using language to create and interpret meaning contributed to employment discrimination against London residents who were born and raised in Pakistan, India or the West Indies. By analyzing interaction in employment interviews, he followed Erickson's (1975) focus on the linguistic basis of discrimination in "gatekeeping encounters": speech events in which a member of a minority community requires the approval of a majority-community

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member to advance professionally or to receive a societal benefit. When interviewers in gatekeeping encounters seek to assess interviewees' qualifications for a position or benefit, they necessarily use language to make that assessment, just as interviewees use language to make their case. Gumperz demonstrated that whereas all participants in gatekeeping encounters tend to look *through* language, petitioners assuming they are being judged on their qualifications and interviewers believing they are making decisions based on the petitioners' qualifications, in fact, the speakers' mutual judgments of abilities and intentions are profoundly influenced, if not determined, by automatic uses of the nuts and bolts of language—pitch and amplitude; intonational patterns; pacing and pausing; the structuring, foregrounding or backgrounding of information; and so on.

Many other researchers have conducted studies that can be thought of as exemplars of IS as intercultural pragmatics. Erickson and Shultz (1982) demonstrate that differences in conventions for signaling listenership between Americans of European and of African descent result in European-American school counselors "talking down" to African-American students. In an early study of my own (Tannen 1981, 2005 [1984]) I analyze the role of what I call *conversational style* in the outcome of a dinner-table conversation and in the more general perception and stereotyping of New York Jewish speakers as "pushy" and aggressive. Maltz and Borker (1982) use Gumperz' model of cross-cultural communication to conceptualize and account for frustration that arises in male/female communication. In all these studies, close attention to miscommunication based on ways of speaking serves the purpose of explaining social phenomena, and individuals who ostensibly speak "the same language" are shown to use these nuts and bolts of language differently when they think they are simply saying what they mean. That is the sense in which encounters among Americans of different ethnic, regional, and class backgrounds, as well as different genders, are seen as intercultural interaction.

A single example from one of Gumperz' studies will give an idea of interactional sociolinguistic research methods and its power to account for outcomes in intercultural encounters. Gumperz (1982: 173–174) was called upon to address a thorny employment situation. The staff cafeteria at a British airport had recently, for the first time, hired food servers from India and Pakistan, and both supervisors and customers were complaining that these new employees were "surly and uncooperative." For their part, the Indian and Pakistani employees were complaining that they were being discriminated against. In order to figure out what was going on, Gumperz tape-recorded interactions that took place as customers

were served in the cafeteria. While listening to the audiotapes, he identified a small contrast in the use of pitch and intonation that accounted in part for both complaints. Customers who came through the line and chose a meat course were asked whether or not they wanted gravy. Both British and South Asian servers posed this question by uttering a single word, "gravy." But the British servers said it with rising intonation while the South Asian servers said it with falling intonation. This tiny difference in paralinguistic features—whether the pitch went up or down at the end of a single word—resulted in very different impressions. To British ears, "Gravy?" said with rising intonation sounded like a question roughly paraphrased as "Would you like gravy?" In stark contrast, "Gravy.", said with falling intonation, would be heard as a statement which might roughly be paraphrased, "This is gravy. Take it or leave it."

Gumperz' next step was to play the key segments of interaction back to both British and South Asian employees. British cafeteria workers pointed to the South Asians' responses as evidence that they were indeed rude to customers. The South Asian cafeteria workers felt that they had caught their British colleagues displaying discrimination and prejudice, since they were being taken to task for saying exactly the same thing as their British co-workers were saying. It was only when their supervisor and their English teacher both explained how the different intonation patterns resulted in different "meaning" that the South Asian servers understood the reactions which had previously seemed to them incomprehensible. Indeed, they spontaneously recalled intonation patterns used by their British co-workers which had struck their ears as odd. For their part, the supervisors learned that for speakers of South Asian languages, the falling intonation was simply the normal way of asking a question in that context.

Because the use of intonational contours is conventionalized, the impression of rudeness when the word "gravy" is spoken with falling intonation is obvious to speakers of British English and invisible to South Asian speakers of a different variety of English. We think in terms of "polite" and "rude" not "intonational contours," yet often these impressions are based on just such linguistic (or, as Gumperz calls them, paralinguistic and prosodic) phenomena. This example illustrates a number of points that are key to IS. First, it shows that tiny linguistic features can play a large part in conveying meaning and hence in negotiating relationships. Second, it shows that speakers of different cultural backgrounds develop systematically different conventions for using and interpreting linguistic features. And it also demonstrates that differing contextualization cues can contribute to the perception and the reality of social inequality and discrimination. Whereas this study, like many other IS studies, examines

interaction between English speakers who are members of different cultural groups, differences in the use of linguistic signaling devices are even more striking in interactions among speakers who grew up in different countries speaking different languages, the more so if those languages belong to vastly different language families.

Work in IS has been criticized for denying political, social, and economic forces that play a significant, perhaps an overwhelming, role in real-life encounters, especially those involving members of minority groups. Such critiques assume that IS practitioners claim that linguistic processes are the only ones at play, and therefore deny the existence of power relations and outright discrimination. In fact, IS analysis is intended, first and foremost, to account for how language works to create meaning in interaction, and, second, as one of many elements that contribute to outcomes when members of different cultures encounter each other in contexts where language is a major medium of negotiation. Its methods and theoretical conceptions of how language works to create meaning and to influence mutual evaluation constitute a useful and uniquely appropriate framework for analyzing intercultural pragmatics, as it provides microanalytical tools and theoretical concepts that account for the "how" in "how we do things with words"—in interaction.

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