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Contextual Inferences in Intercultural Communication

Abstract

In this paper we discuss intercultural communication using the notions of high-context and low-context cultures. Using examples from English and Finnish conversations, we exemplify dialogue strategies and relative speaker and hearer responsibilities via three conversational aspects: anaphoric references, topic introduction, and disjunctive questions. The examples show different interpretations depending on the cultural presuppositions, and we can conclude that the Finnish communication style falls into that typical of high-context cultures.

1. Introduction

It is a commonplace that people's communication strategies and speaking habits differ. For example, it is widely believed that there are major differences between Eastern and Western communication styles, which can be summarised in the anecdote of a Japanese manager explaining the difference between Japanese and American communication as follows: "We are a homogeneous people and don't have to speak as much as you do here. When we say one word, we understand ten, but here you have to say ten to understand one."

Intercultural communication studies have related communication differences to cultural aspects and especially to the role of social context in interpersonal communication. Expectations of the individual's communicative behaviour in the social context determine the manner in which successful communication takes place, and the tacit knowledge about suitable and polite communication strategies and speaking styles is mostly culturally learnt patterns of appropriate communicative behaviour.

The two classic patterns can be summarised as differences between low context cultures vs. high context cultures, as outlined by the anthropologist Edward Hall (1976). In the low context culture, everything

is fully spelled out: ideas, thoughts and requests are made explicit, and the actions depend very much on what is said or written. In a high context culture, however, the communicators assume a lot of shared knowledge, experience, and world view, and thus less is made explicit and much more is implicit or communicated in indirect ways. The roles and communicative obligations of the speaker and the listener are also different: in a high-context culture, the speaker is responsible for the emotional impact of the message, while the listener is responsible for understanding and providing acknowledgement of the message; in other words, the speaker's task is to provide information that would motivate or persuade the listener to consider something that she wouldn't normally do. In a low context culture, the roles are quite opposite: the speaker's responsibility is to speak clearly and unambiguously, to deliver a crisp and understandable message, while the listener's responsibility is to keep up with the speaker, to ask questions that show interest in the topic and also update their knowledge of the information provided. These concepts have been especially used e.g. in studying problems in business negotiations and information content in advertising and mass communication.

Examples of low context cultures are taken to be North American, German, Swiss and Scandinavian cultures, whereas Japanese, Chinese, Middle Eastern, French, Mediterranean, and Latin American cultures are examples of high context cultures. However, the classes can only be considered descriptive since it is difficult to determine identifying features that would locate certain cultures at some place in the low-high-context dimension. Indeed, the degrees of politeness, indirectness, explicitness, persuasion, and emotions encoded in the speakers' utterances and particular conversations are next to impossible to measure quantitatively so as to provide more convincing evidence for the amount of context used in the interpretation and generation of the utterances. On the other hand, the distinction has proved to be a useful tool to describe certain miscommunications and problem situations that frequently occur in intercultural communication.

In this paper, we analyse three dialogue examples based on conversations between the authors. We compare Finnish and British English conversational strategies, and on the basis of them, draw the conclusion that the Finnish communication style resembles that typical of high-context cultures, compared to the British style which is typical of low-context cultures. It is interesting that the Finnish communication style is thus significantly different from that found in the neighbouring

Scandinavian countries. Our analysis also supports the findings in Tiittula (1993) who studied cultural differences between Finnish and German business contacts, and Pajupuu (1995) who compared Finnish and Estonian communicative behaviours.

2. Anaphoric references

There is general agreement that conversations are about something (topic) and that the speaker provides some newsy bits about this (new information). It is also rather clear that once the topic has been introduced, it can be referred to by a pronoun so as to avoid repetition and to speed up the information exchange. In ordinary conversations references and information structure are usually rather straightforward, and in the case of unclear and inaccurate communication, the speakers have particular repair strategies to sort out problems of apparent misunderstandings (Levinson 1983). Self-initiated or other-initiated repairs are not necessarily limited to correction of plain errors, but can include word searches, hearing problems, or uncertainty about understanding that requires confirmation. In fact, the repair practises often go unnoticed as part of the normal course of interaction: the speakers initiate self-corrections (*we need a train- um- a tube ticket*), or the partner initiates a clarification question, and the shared understanding of the topic is jointly constructed through interaction.

A: Did you know that Mark got his PhD last week

B: No, I didn't even know that he was at the university

A: No I meant Mark Jones not Jordan.

However, normal repair practices, whereby the partner notices a possible problem, initiates a repair sequence, and the speaker then provides a correcting response in the next turn do not always work in intercultural communication. One of the common types of intercultural communication failures is misunderstood contextual reference: what is it that we are talking about? The context in which the interaction takes place does not only deal with factual information such as finding the right word or getting the right referent for a proper name, but it also seems to comprise subtle issues

concerning the focus of attention and dialogue topic, as illustrated by the example below:

F (Finnish speaker): Have you seen the new curriculum plan?

E (English speaker): Yes, and I'm annoyed because my 1st year computation course has been moved to the spring term.

F: **It** is really a bit hastily put together I agree.

E: No, my course is well-planned, certainly not put together hastily.

The problem in this conversation is to select the correct referent for the anaphoric pronoun. In English, anaphoric pronouns usually have rather narrow scope, i.e. the preferred antecedent is to be found among the elements mentioned in the immediately preceding utterance (cf. centering theory, Walker & al. 1998). The appropriate referent for the bold-faced *it* would thus be *my 1st year computation course*. An English speaker, looking for the antecedent in the nearest linguistic context, finds F's utterance confusing since the only possible antecedent candidate, *my course*, does not fit into the interpretation of the rest of F's utterance.

In Finnish, quite contrary, the anaphoric context is the discourse situation itself, comprising the topic and the discourse referents that have been mentioned. In the above case, the Finnish speaker would, without much trouble, infer that the referent for *it* must be *new curriculum plan*, since this was the topic introduced in the beginning of the interaction. E's contribution is understood as providing new information on this topic by specifying a particular detail of the curriculum, but the contribution is not regarded as changing the conversational topic to *1st year computation course*, i.e. the original topic is understood to continue to be the topic as no indication of a topic change is present.

In terms of low and high-context cultures, the source of misunderstanding can be explained by the amount of contextual inference needed in the interpretation of the pronoun: in the low-context culture, the speaker must make sure that the communication is unambiguous concerning what is referred to, that the correct referent is easily reachable in the immediate context, and the hearer need not make assumptions or draw long inference chains in order to reach the correct referent. In the high-context culture, on the other hand, the hearer is required to search the present conversational context, not only the linguistic context of what has been said, in order to understand what the speaker's intended meaning is.

In other words, the hearer has the responsibility to make the utterance meaningful in the context. In particular, it is the hearer's responsibility to pick up the correct referent, based on what they know about the dialogue topic, topic shifting and the general constraints of the conversation.

Consequently, in the Finnish communication, the inference chain to determine the correct referent is based on the contextually shared information content of what is the current topic and what counts as a topic change. A Finnish speaker can thus rely on the context and shared information in order to produce a referring element while a Finnish listener has to do more work in order to reach the correct interpretation among the various discourse referents available. An English speaker, on the contrary, has learnt that it is the speaker's responsibility to contribute meaningful utterances so that the hearer can easily and without much contextual reasoning understand the intended meaning.

3. Topic introduction

Another example of the different contextual reasoning and speaker/hearer divisions of labour in conversations can be found in topic introduction. The introduction of the topic is one of the important means of interaction to get the dialogue going along: it can be seen in reporting practices, as answers to the question "what happened, what did you talk about", as well as in spontaneous presentations of new topics in existing conversations or in new situations. In general, the beginning of the conversation follows a particular opening sequence which consists of greetings, self-introductions, and the introduction of the main topic (Levinson 1983). Usually topic introduction is constrained by the particular activity that the dialogue is part of and the underlying task that the interaction is started for: the activity determines the roles of the speakers and the content is determined by the task.

Consider the following dialogue taking place in a car:

E: It's getting quite hot now...

F: [acts by turning down the heater]

E: ... so I'll take my woolly hat off.

F has understood E's first utterance as an indirect speech act and reacts accordingly: the reason behind E's utterance is not just to inform F about the factual situation, namely that the car is already warm, but to request that the heating can be turned off, and as a cooperative partner, this is how F reacts to the utterance. This kind of communication is typical in high-context cultures. The speakers do not express their needs and wants explicitly since the hearer is required to pay attention to the partner's state and act so as to fulfil, or at least support, their goals. Thus, in order to avoid uncomfortable warmth with winter clothes on, a sensible partner reaction is to turn the heating down. In fact, in a highly contextual culture, the same result could have been achieved without any verbal communication, by a mere unsatisfied expression on one's face.

On the other hand, in low-context cultures, conversation should start with a suitable introductory remark which directs the hearer's attention to the actual topic. In the example above, E's first utterance is intended to be nothing more than an introduction for a discussion concerning possible actions in a situation where the car has become hot and one could either switch off the heater or take one's woolly winter hat off.

The dialogue shows how communication fails in the topic introduction routines. Low context communication requires that the speaker must provide the hearer with the correct communicative context, whereas in high-context communication, the speaker may go to the main topic straightaway, since the shared situation provides the necessary communicative context. For an Englishman, it is important that activities are hedged with verbal communication, and thus E attempts to provide the context for conversation by describing the state of affairs. For a Finn, it is the contextual facts that determine how the utterance is to be interpreted, and since the alternatives in this case are too simple and unimportant for an elaborated discussion on what to do, the speech act is (mis)interpreted by F as an indirect request to turn off the heater.

4. Disjunctive questions

The third example to illustrate the role of context in language interpretation is found in disjunctive questions. An English person asking a disjunctive question expects the answer to be one of the disjuncts, or possibly an explicitly expressed third alternative:

E1: Do you want tea or coffee?

E2: Tea please / Coffee please / Actually, I'd prefer a glass of water.

A Finnish person, on the contrary, seems to interpret a disjunctive question as a topic introduction concerning the hypernym of the disjuncts. The above question could thus be interpreted as “do you want a hot beverage such as tea or coffee or something similar”, i.e. asking about the person's wish to have something to drink in the first place. An appropriate answer can thus express an agreement that it is good to have something to drink whereas the actual drink need not be specified.

F1: Do you want tea or coffee?

F2: Yes please / Tea would be nice and coffee would be fine.

In a low-context culture, the speakers are individualistic: they are expected to have personal preferences and to express them clearly, whereas in a high-context culture the speakers are expected to sense the general atmosphere and to refrain as much as possible from stating their own viewpoint in order to accommodate to group consensus and harmony. For an English person, the disjunctive question is a genuine question concerning two alternatives, and socially important politeness is encoded in the very act of requesting the partner's opinion and allowing them to make the decision for themselves. For a Finn, such a straightforward request is daunting: you are expected to go along with the group and not cause trouble by expressing your individual requirements and opinions. The Finnish answer thus makes it clear that you are willing to go along with whatever decision seems best and appropriate in the context. For instance, it may be that the speaker has almost run out of coffee and requesting coffee in this situation would cause extra problems for them.

5. Contextual inferences and rational agents

Hobbs (1979) argues that discourse coherence does not result from the discourse being about the same entity or the same set of entities, but from the speakers' need to be understood. This need drives the speakers to seek

for an appropriate coherence relation, and the fact that a discourse is about some set of entities is a “trace of the deeper processes of coherence”. These deeper processes refer to abductive reasoning whereby the speakers attempt to explain the observed facts and instantiate the semantics so that as a result, discourse coherence appears as a side-effect of the process. We agree with Hobbs that coherence is due to the communicators’ desire to make sense of the discourse, but we also make a stronger claim, namely that the communicators are *obliged* to interpret discourse as coherent, as well as to produce coherent discourse, given that they act as rational, cooperative agents (Jokinen 1994). Hence, coherence is motivated not only by the speakers’ need to be understood but also by their compliance with communicative principles and obligations. Furthermore, these principles and obligations are culturally determined: as can be seen from the examples above, the speaker and the hearer are bound by obligations related to the amount of contextual information that is assumed to be taken into account by the communicators. In the high-context cultures, obligations emphasise interpersonal relationships, and thus the communicators must adopt conversational strategies that support the establishment and maintenance of these kinds of relationships. In other words, instead of cognitive considerations, the speakers pay attention to ethical considerations where intuition and feelings are the preferred methods for reasoning. While the speaker is encouraged to leave as much information as possible to be derived from contextual inferences, the hearer’s interpretational limits of the message are rather loose, forcing the hearer to take all the contextual possibilities into account. The hearer expects the speaker to give guidance and persuasion concerning a particular topic, while the speaker expects the hearer to follow and acknowledge the pieces of information.

In the low-context cultures, on the contrary, the obligations direct the speakers to value cognitive considerations where facts, logic and linear reasoning play a crucial role. Social motivation is not as important as the ability to provide enough information for the communicators to take the desirable and necessary decisions by themselves. The speaker is thus obliged to produce facts and views as clearly as possible, while the hearer is obliged to contribute to the concise and efficient communication by asking clarifying questions. The speaker also expects the hearer to assist the speaker in the task of delivering novel information, while the hearer expects the speaker to produce information that is easy to understand.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed the responsibility of the speaker and the hearer in communication and argued that there are culturally determined patterns that affect the smoothness and understanding in the conversation. We presented three examples of conversation between an English speaker and a Finnish speaker to illustrate situations prone to intercultural miscommunication, and explained the differences in terms of high and low-context cultures. Having learnt the communicative obligations typical for a high-context culture, Finnish speakers rely on contextual interpretation and also leave more room for hearers to interpret the utterance details in their own way. They expect anaphoric references to be found in a larger context than the preceding utterance, i.e. conforming to the notion of dialogue topic rather than sentential forward looking centers, they are more likely to interpret presentation utterances on the basis of the current interaction context as indirect request than topic introductions, and they tend to interpret disjunctive questions as questions dealing with the agreement on the topic. English speakers, on the other hand, conform to the communicative strategies typical for low-context cultures, and assume the necessary context for the interpretation to be explicitly given in the utterance or in the preceding introduction. They expect to find antecedents for anaphoric references in the immediately preceding linguistic context rather than in the larger dialogue context, they follow the communicative patterns of verbal topic introduction rather than shared context, and they tend to regard disjunctive questions as genuine questions concerning choice from a set of alternatives. As a consequence, misunderstandings arise when the contextual information leads to a different interpretation from the straightforward linguistic one, and when the speech acts are not understood as intended.

It is unlikely that miscommunication can be totally avoided, even with the help of intercultural communication studies. Dialogue strategies are based on cultural patterns and learnt through interaction: reactions are automatic and it is difficult to control one's emotions and primitive reactions while simultaneously being aware of the partner's needs, desires, and intentions so as to produce culturally adapted and appropriate communicative responses. However, the intercultural analysis helps raise awareness of the issues involved in communication, especially in such an

ordinary activity as everyday conversation. Being aware of different dialogue strategies and communication styles, it is possible to avoid frustration when one's point may not get through as expected. Even when communication may be limited to basic needs for factual information exchange, spoken interaction management cannot avoid intercultural issues. For as we have seen, the contextual inferences required in the interpretation and planning are culturally conditioned, and thus themselves intercultural issues.

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