Interactional sociolinguistics

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Interactional sociolinguistics is concerned with how speakers signal and interpret meaning in social interaction. The term and the perspective are grounded in the work of John Gumperz (1982a, 1982b), who blended insights and tools from anthropology, linguistics, pragmatics, and conversation analysis into an interpretive framework for analyzing such meanings. Interactional sociolinguistics attempts to bridge the gulf between empirical communicative forms – e.g., words, prosody, register shifts – and what speakers and listeners take themselves to be doing with these forms. Methodologically, it relies on close → discourse analysis of audio- or video-recorded interaction. Such methodology is central to uncovering meaning-making processes because many conventions for signaling and interpreting meaning in talk are fleeting, unconscious, and culturally variable.

ORIGIN AND THEORY

Interactional sociolinguistics was developed in an anthropological context of cross-cultural comparison, and the seminal work that defined interactional sociolinguistics focused largely on contexts of intercultural miscommunication (→ Intercultural and Intergroup Communication; Comparative Research). It is in such contexts – where unconscious cultural expectations and practices are not shared – that the perspective has the most salient explanatory value. The perspective has been extended to cross-gender communication, most notably by Deborah Tannen (1990), and it has also been applied to the performance of social identity through talk. The framework can be applied to any interaction, however, and much of the empirical work that falls under the rubric “discourse analysis” in communication, linguistic anthropology, sociology, discursive psychology, and socially oriented linguistics owes a debt to this perspective.

The key theoretical contribution of interactional sociolinguistics is to illustrate a way in which social background knowledge is implicated in the signaling and interpreting of meaning. While ethnographers of communication have long emphasized that talk is contextually and culturally embedded, they have not specified how sociocultural and linguistic knowledge are systematically linked in the communication of meaning (→ Ethnography of Communication). Gumperz’s interactional sociolinguistics operationalizes a dimension of this relationship. His program shows that socio-cultural knowledge is not just beliefs and judgments external to interaction, but rather is embedded within the talk and behavior of interaction itself. At a theoretical level, this undermines a “conduit metaphor” or “information theory” notion of communication, in which context is presumed to be discrete and separate from communicative content.

Gumperz argued that we communicate rapidly shifting interpretive frames through conventionalized surface forms, which he calls contextualization cues. These contextualization cues – “constellations of surface features of message form” – are “the means by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is
to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows” (1982a, 131). These surface forms range across semiotic modes, including such varied phenomena as prosody, code and lexical choice, formulaic expressions, sequencing choices, and visual and gestural phenomena. They are united in a common, functional category by their use, commonly in constellations of multiple features. They cue interpretive frameworks in which to interpret the propositional content of utterances, which can otherwise be ambiguous.

An example can illustrate the dual functioning of the communicative stream as both referential content and a context in which to interpret that very referential content. In American English, the utterance “Nice tie!” can represent a sincere compliment, or it can represent a joking insult, i.e., that the speaker finds the tie somehow inappropriate. Contextualization cues within the performance of the utterance can suggest the frame in which the utterance is to be interpreted. A broad smile and marked intonation accompanying the words “Nice tie!” can serve as contextualization cues that channel inferential processes toward a particular interpretation. Contextualization cues do not directly index or refer to a specific interpretive frame, but rather serve as prods to inferential processes. A smile, for example, does not always indicate a joking insult frame for the talk that it accompanies. The functioning of a given cue is made even more ambiguous by the fact that such cues typically occur in constellations of features, e.g., a smile and a marked intonation contour, in which the constellation of features channels inferential processes differently than any one feature, in isolation, might.

The functioning of such cues also depends on the broader socio-cultural context. A “joking insult frame” is more likely to occur in some US settings than in others, e.g., in informal interaction between male friends. Inferring a “joking insult” meaning of the utterance “Nice tie!” thus involves interpreting both the external, socio-cultural context of the interaction and the moment-to-moment interpretive contexts created within the stream of communicative behavior itself. Such cues and inferential patterns are acquired through prolonged and intensive face-to-face interaction in particular cultural settings, typically as part of one’s primary language socialization. Contextualization conventions vary across cultures and sub-cultures, just as languages and accents vary across social groupings. They thus form part of one’s socio-cultural background, just as other cultural practices and beliefs do.

**CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

Cultural differences in contextualization conventions can undermine intergroup communication insidiously because individuals tend to be unconscious of this dimension of interaction. Contextualization cues have several characteristics that make them difficult to recognize. They tend to be scalar, i.e., they vary along a continuum, such as pitch, rather than existing as discrete forms, such as individual lexical items. Most such cues are nonreferential, i.e., they carry no direct propositional information, but rather serve meta-communicative framing functions. Finally, their meanings are a function of the context of their use, so that individual cues cannot be analyzed in isolation from their use or assigned a single, stable function or meaning. It is thus very difficult for individuals to recognize these cues or the roles that they are playing in communication. While individuals from different
cultures may well be aware of speaking different languages or dressing differently, they are seldom aware of the ways in which slight differences in contextualization conventions can create interactional difficulties.

Gumperz (1982a, 173) reports, e.g., how intonation in uttering a single word led to misunderstandings that damaged relations between South Asian immigrant cafeteria workers and Anglo British workers at a British airport. When an Anglo British cafeteria server in this workplace offered gravy to a person in line, she would say “Gravy?” with a rising intonation contour. Anglo British workers used this prosodic information to interpret the utterance as an offer or question: “Would you like gravy?” In contrast, when recently-immigrated South Asian cafeteria workers asked employees if they wanted gravy, they said “Gravy” with falling intonation. Anglo British workers interpreted the falling intonation as contextualizing a statement (akin to “This is gravy – take it or leave it”), which they found redundant and rude. Neither Anglo British nor South Asian workers were able to articulate the role that intonation played in their problematic interactions until it was pointed out by outside trainers. Thus, while two groups may “speak the same language,” i.e., share syntax, phonology, and vocabulary, they may differ in the ways they meta-communicatively define the moment-to-moment activities in which they are engaging.

Because socio-cultural differences in contextualization conventions are unconscious, they are not a readily available explanation to participants for breakdowns in communication or stilted, asynchronous interactions. When a person recognizes an apparent communicative breakdown or disjuncture in interaction, a psychological idiom is readily available to explain an interlocutor’s behavior, i.e., the other’s behavior can be accounted for in terms of rudeness, insensitivity, selfishness, or some other personality trait. When such problematic interactions come to be associated with interaction across ethnic or cultural lines, it can result in pejorative stereotyping of entire groups and the reinforcement of intergroup boundaries.

**METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

Isolating and defining the functions of contextualization cues requires the use of electronic recordings and systematic elicitation techniques to recover native speakers’ perceptual and inferential processes. In the example of “Nice tie!,” native consultants can be asked such questions as: “How do you know that this was meant as a joking insult rather than a compliment? What was it about the way that Speaker A said it that makes you think it is an insult? Can you say it to me in a way that would be an insult and then say it to me in a way that would be a compliment?” Such techniques allow one to link specific surface forms of discourse (prosodic patterns, code switches, visual phenomena, etc.) to communicative effects and interpretive patterns. When consultants from a given social group provide consistent interpretations of a communicative sequence and consistently draw attention to the same empirical communicative features as bases for that interpretation, it provides evidence for socio-culturally specific contextualization conventions.

The tools, methods, and implicit theory of interactional sociolinguistics are eclectic. It shares with → conversation analysis an insistence on careful, line-by-line analysis of recorded, naturally occurring talk, but it diverges from conversation analysis in exploring
inferential processes and social and cultural worlds outside of that talk. With anthropology it shares a focus on cultural variation and the meanings that participants themselves attribute to their lives and actions. From philosophy of language and linguistics it borrows such notions as implicature and speech acts, but it attends to real people in their actual, messy interactions. With research in communication, it shares an interest in actors’ apparent strategies and intended meanings in talk, and it overlaps with strands in many of these disciplines that attend to communicative frames and meta-discursivity in talk and interaction.

Some scholars have criticized interactional sociolinguistic accounts of intercultural miscommunication, arguing that apparent miscommunication is more a function of social and political inequality than of divergent patterns for linking surface communicative forms and meanings. Problematic interactions are thus seen not as “misunderstandings,” but as a form of communication that highlights ongoing differences in perspective and socio-political interests. Many studies of intercultural miscommunication have failed to attend to the role of inequality in such interactions. This is not a shortcoming in the perspective of interactional sociolinguistics per se, but a limitation of such studies themselves. Interactional sociolinguistics is first and foremost a method for analyzing how social knowledge and linguistic knowledge intersect in creating meaning in talk. Such a method can be used to show how inequality and conflicting interests are negotiated in talk just as it can be used to show how cultural and linguistic differences can play out in such interaction.

Interactional sociolinguistics, with its notions of contextualization cues and conversational inferencing, provides a powerful framework for examining meaning-making at the intersection of talk and culture. Like other perspectives, such as indexicality, that focus on the intersection of talk, culture, and meaning, interactional sociolinguistics is fundamentally interpretive, rather than predictive. With its eclectic toolbox and unabashedly functional orientation, interactional sociolinguistics lacks the theoretical austerity of many approaches to interaction and meaning. However, it makes up for this lack of theoretical elegance with its usefulness and its insights into the social and cultural nature of communicative action. It helps to account for how different dimensions of communicative behavior are related, e.g., prosody and words, and to explain the achievement, or lack of achievement, of intersubjective understanding in particular instances of interaction.

SEE ALSO: Communication Accommodation Theory, Comparative Research, Conversation Analysis, Ethnography of Communication, Intercultural and Intergroup Communication, Linguistic Pragmatics, Speech Codes Theory

References and Suggested Readings

Interactivity is a relatively new, evolving, and still elusive concept in the study of communication, most frequently associated with new digital media technologies (→ Digital Media, History of). The concept’s elusiveness may result from the common use of the term to identify a loosely defined bundle of attributes rather than a single attribute or phenomenon. At its core, interactivity refers to the phenomenon of mutual adaptation, usually between a communication medium such as the Internet or a video game and a human user of that medium.

A seminal, if somewhat technical, definition of interactivity was offered by Rafaeli (1988, 111): “Formally stated, interactivity is an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions.” The key element is responsiveness – what one says or does depends on another – a notion clearly rooted in human face-to-face conversation. However, given the rich possibilities of human–machine communication, Rafaeli warned that a model narrowly based on dyadic human conversation would be too simplistic and reductive. Interactivity, to Rafaeli, is a quintessential concept regarding the nature of communication.

In his original account of interactivity, Rafaeli considered the term “intuitively appealing but underdefined.” Similarly, Jensen (1998) found it “frequently used but seldom understood” and “outrageously complex,” while Sundar (2004) characterized it as “much touted but undertheorized.” In a review of the literature, Bucy (2004, 373) concluded that “interactivity has been identified as a core concept of new media, yet despite nearly three decades of study and analysis, we scarcely know what interactivity is, let alone what it does, and have scant insight into the conditions in which interactive processes are likely to be consequential for members of a social system.”

**KEY CRITERIA OF INTERACTIVITY**

From more than a dozen published typologies of interactivity, one can derive four common themes, even as terminologies vary. The first and perhaps most straightforward criterion is the directionality of communication. Throughout most of the late agricultural