

The interplay of verbal, vocal, and visual cues in the co-construction of the experience of alterity in exchange students' talk



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Abstract

Based on the analysis of three videotaped sequences in which a Swedish student and two German students talk about their first intercultural encounters in Brazil, I will show how the co-occurrence of lexical, syntactic, prosodic, suprasegmental-phonological, as well as gestural and mimic elements forms specific stylized features as contextualization cues. Through these cues the interactants construct and frame their experiences in creative ways. The empirical data originates from the project *Intercultural Communication in Interaction*, initiated at the University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Brazil in 2012. The data bears out a strong interplay of verbal, vocal, and visual elements which are displayed by the participants while they talk about their experiences of alterity: They employ (a) reported speech primarily for referring to opposing value systems sustained by the expression *it's like* as a quotative construction; (b) lexico-semantic and syntactic parallelism for constructing and underpinning opposing categories; (c) pitch jumps, pauses, laughter, lengthenings, and glides endowed with strong emotion for expressing bewilderment, astonishment, or consternation; (d) facial expressions and gestural devices for contextualizing their experiences of cultural differences in metonymic ways; and, finally, (e) the situational construction of co-membership and affiliation through head nods and laughter to endorse the teller's perspective.
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1. Introduction

Recently, the idea of 'cultural differences' has lost its popularity in the light of the growing number of critical studies which replace the essentialist notion of culture as a mostly nationally or ethnically bound domain by the post-structuralist hybrid concept of transculturalism (Bhabha, 1994; Clifford, 1997). The problem with these partly ideologically motivated approaches is that they often originate from an extra-communicative point of view, and are thus dissociated from the involved subjects themselves (Bühler, 1934/1982:48–69; Ungeheuer, 1972/2004) without empirically asking about the role of the participant's perspective when real 'talk-in-interaction' takes place. In fact, conversations between exchange students may reveal that despite so called transcultural globalization processes those individuals still experience their arrival in a new culture as a sudden confrontation with the multiplicity of realities.¹

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¹ For a critical comment on the hybrid approach to culture see Dreher (2007). For empirical support, see the study on the metaphorical construction of boundaries on the verbal and gestural level in intercultural talk-in-interaction (Schröder, 2015).

It is especially the essays of Schütz (1944/1976) and Simmel (1908/1992) which account for a phenomenological-sociological foundation broaching the issue of ‘otherness’ regarding such barrier transgression experiences. Thus, even today, for many exchange students participating in school or university exchange programs, the target culture abruptly becomes their new everyday lifeworld constituting a ground for orientation, behavior, and communication processes and patterns. In order to master practical problems, the stranger has no other choice than to act according to his or her own stock of knowledge generated by well-proven recipes, and guided by the cognitive and communicative styles provided by the culture of origin. As a consequence, the first resistance he or she will experience is the failure to meet the expectations he or she had never before put into question. This is the key moment in which he or she begins to develop concepts and constructions differentiating between his or her own and the other culture by adopting an extra-communicative attitude in the face of those intercultural communication processes he or she has participated in so far. By this metacognitive-reflexive process, the indexically encoded communicative incident is recoded and typified in compliance with the categories at hand which themselves are rooted in the collective and implicit knowledge of his or her own culture (Loenhoff, 2008).

Hence, the experience of alterity has to be taken as a natural strategy to deal with the new reality and might be observed as being constructed interactively and *in situ* between exchange students. This implies our pivotal question which we would like to address: How do exchange students who have recently arrived in a foreign country retrospectively construct their first experiences in ongoing discourse between each other? How do their first extra-communicatively extracted theories and typologies as a result of the first communicative encounters *in* the new culture enter such a reflexive conversation *about* the new culture?

Below, I will analyze three sequences representing three classical different domains of ‘critical incidents’ (Fiedler et al., 1971) – behavior, values, and taboos. ‘Critical incidents’ are those moments which are experienced as potentially critical, puzzling, and open for misinterpretations. I will show the ways in which exchange students conceptualize those experiences on a verbal, vocal, and visual level, in which the co-occurrence of lexical, syntactic, prosodic, and suprasegmental-phonological, as well as gestural and mimic elements form certain stylized features as contextualization cues to construct and frame their experience in creative ways.

2. Theoretical framework

Communication itself is a highly reflexive process in which we do not only refer to objects, people, relations, and events in our lifeworld but also frame our utterances continuously by positioning ourselves; by (re-)defining the activity type in progress; by labeling our own contributions as ironic, serious, or humorous; by giving hints to the hearer regarding our own attitudes and evaluations; and by guiding him or her to appropriately interpret these signals. Linking the methodological framework of Conversation Analysis with the concept of contextualization cues according to Gumperz (1982), including his shifting focus to prosodic² and nonverbal hints as well as his fundamental insight of a “reflexive notion of context” (Auer, 1992:21), ‘Interactional Stylistics’ accommodates the analysis of ‘style features’ or ‘holistic style structures’ as investigating co-occurring verbal and vocal means in ongoing conversation (Sandig and Selting, 1997:138–142; Betten, 2001:1397). Finally, it is Auer (1986) and Verschuere (1998) who draw their attention to the implications of this reflexivity, concluding that metapragmatic awareness of situation and context should be seen as responsible for the co-constitution of the ongoing communication rejecting former approaches, which conceived communication as merely determined by the context as, for instance, the traditional correlational sociolinguistic work of Labov (1966, 1972) or Bernstein (1971).

Calling into question this often persisting idea of context determining style in a unidirectional way Interactional Stylistics provides a model of a mutual relation between style and context in which style is culturally reified and emphasis is given to the way in which the co-occurring contextualization cues construct meaning interactively and *in situ*. Accordingly, style is composed by co-occurring rhetoric, lexico-semantic, syntactic, prosodic, and phonetic devices, and is frequently used when the interactants are negotiating the definition of the situation, interactional modalities, the delineation of partial activities, the recipient design of actions, the presentation of self, and rapport management. It plays a crucial role in inferential processing by contextualizing conversational activities as well as in the transition from one partial activity to the next or from one modality to another (Selting, 1997:35).

In recent work, Selting also turns her attention to the visual plane by integrating the domains of gaze, facial expression, gesture, posture, and object manipulation (Selting, 2013). In her analysis of a complaint about a parking violation ticket Selting demonstrates how the co-occurrence of verbal, vocal, and visual cues display the emotive involvement of the speaker’s anger and indignation. Thus, the German speaker switches to the English swear word “FUCK (SIEBzig euro)” (“fuck seventy euro”) at the climax of the story, delivered (a) rhetorically and lexico-semantically as a swear word,

² For Selting (2005), the shift from syntax to prosody also leads to a reanalysis and redefinition of the TCU which, according to Sacks et al. (1974), is a unit in conversation that is defined with respect to turn-taking but it is not yet defined as a linguistic unit.

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