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AGNIESZKA NOWICKA

The Role of Conversational Actions in Negotiating Multicultural Identity

Introduction

The paper focuses on the relationship between conversational actions and construing intercultural identity, as well as its role in effective mediation in intercultural communication, as illustrated by interviews. However, before we can answer the question especially valid for foreign language teaching/learning, that is how to develop mediative competence in a foreign language, the question of what mediation in intercultural communication consist in needs to be handled. The following detailed research question will be approached in the paper: how do speakers use conversational actions to construe their own/each others' social identities in intercultural communication? Which types of identity construction lead to successful mediation?

The data has been gathered in the process of an action research and analyzed by means of linguistic and ethnographic conversation analysis. The research participants are upper intermediate students of English as a foreign language. Their project, preceded by discourse observation tasks, was to conduct an argumentative interview with a foreigner on a freely selected subject, formulated in an intercultural perspective. The aim of the task was to explore intercultural relations.

As the studies on power in intercultural communication show (a study by Reid and Ng quoted in Abrams, O'Connor and Giles 2002: 234),

the interaction participants who control conversational turn-taking are perceived as more influential or powerful than other interaction participants. As the traditional classroom teacher – student communication in Poland usually deprives the latter of the opportunity to practice such control, as a result many Polish students have the tendency to assume dependent roles in intercultural communication and show general problems with regulating an interactional and topical flow of the dialogue while communicating in English. This tendency to lose or misuse discourse control hinders intercultural mediation. For that reason an argumentative interview format was chosen as one of the possible techniques which could:

- 1) increase students interviewers' control over social identity construction, as realized in topic and interactive control;
- 2) help students assume an exploratory and critical stance in an interview.

Social Identity Construction in Interactions

One of the hypotheses to be verified in the paper is that one's social identity tends to be more indeterminate in intercultural communication (Wilczyńska 2004; Nowicka 2004, forthcoming; Kasper 1997: 352–8). While communicating in one's native culture and language, one can take the liberty to interpret social categories in a more standardized, typical way and communication or relation troubles may never appear. However, in intercultural communication, in which identities are less determined, the interaction participant needs to negotiate them to achieve effective communication and reach deeper intersubjectivity. In other words, such a type of communication calls for enhanced identity construction.

Another claim is that successful intercultural communication in a foreign language and developing communicative-intercultural competence calls for construing a special kind of identity, namely an intercultural one, which is paramount to/observable as taking up effective mediation in a foreign language.

Identity construction and mediation will be explored by means of linguistic conversation analysis, as primarily constructivist communicative processes based on the negotiation of meaning and the joint co-construction in a moment-to-moment interaction, not on expanding already predetermined meanings of social categories, as can be inferred from the predominating studies on learning intercultural mediation (for a discussion, see Ochs 2005: 78–91; Zarate, Gohard-Radenkovic, Lussier, and Penz 2004: 231).

Identity construction will be observed by means of MCDs, membership categorization devices, renamed here as categorizing actions to emphasize their intentional character. MCDs are communicative actions used to classify and refer to groups such as children, Poles, foreigners, males, etc. They comprise certain predicates or actions that a given social category can perform, as well as competencies, motifs, values, obligations, etc. (Psathas 1999: 143; Sacks 1992: 40–8).

Since direct categorizing actions are the subject of another paper, the focus in this article will be on less direct predicates, that is conversational actions implying certain categories in the understanding of interaction-participants. Moreover, to grasp the co-construction of social identities, the observation of actions refers to the following framework represented in Figure 1:

- 1) Conversational actions directed at or resulting in self-categorization – the way the person identifies herself/himself;
- 2) Conversational actions directed at or resulting in other-categorization – the way the other person's identity is construed by interaction participants.

As shown in Figure 1, by means of conversational actions, speakers negotiate their own and their partner's social identities. The process can lead to the construction of either monocultural or intercultural social identity of the interaction participants. Although cognitive representations of social categories and relations do not determine social actions, they can influence the way speakers act, hence the dotted arrows in the diagram.

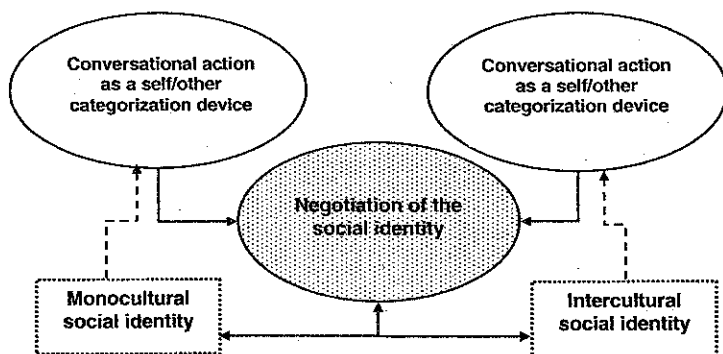


Figure 1. The framework for analyzing social identity construction.

Data Analysis

The Role of Argumentatively Oriented Conversational Actions in Mediation and Construing Intercultural Identity

The interview analyzed in this paper was chosen basically for the possibility of observing how construing an argumentative stance influences mediation. It was conducted by JS, a psychology student, with her former teacher of English, a Welshman WW. In the first excerpt I analyze the role of reformulations in assuming a critical, argumentative stance in exploring intercultural relations and creating an intercultural identity.

Excerpt 1. WW – JS interview¹

8. JS ok so e;hm: how common to you is the problem
 9. of (.) patronage
 10. (1.0)

¹Transcription symbols: (.) micropause; (1.0) pause in seconds; [the beginning of an overlap; : prolonged sound; h outbreath or laughter; .hhh inbreath; emphasis; CAPITALS utterance louder than the surrounding talk; °silent° utterance; † raising intonation; ‡ falling intonation; >quicker< utterance and <slower> utterance; / interrupted or discontinued utterance or a sharp cut-off of the prior sound; = latching between utterances.

- 11. WW in Poland or you mean generally
 12. JS Ohp- first generally
 13. (.)
 → 14. WW well I haven't really thought about it {but as
 15. JS [m:h hh
 → 16. WW far as far as I'm aware I think in Poland
 17. you're more like likely to get jobs through
 18. connections more so (.) than in England
 19. JS ad uh:m do you think that=
 → 20. WW =as far as I'm aware
 21. JS yeah it's true [most
 → 22. WW [I don't I don't know everything
 → 23. but but that's the opinion and all the impression
 24. I had
 25. JS yo/ well most (.) respondents said that eh:
 26. things that helps you the most is (.) knowing the
 27. right people
 → 28. WW yes uh I think (.) almost certainly this is more
 29. true in Poland than it would be in England
 30. JS well do you think that ehm (.) t's eh:
 → 31. WW as far as a know I mean I don't work for any
 32. company or anything like that=

In response to JS's action in line 8–9: "How common is the problem of patronage in Poland," Warren interprets JS's action as an indirect group categorization of Poles and seems to consider it problematic, since he modifies it by argumentative hedges and emphasizes the limitations of his position and his evaluative capacity. The following conversational hedges and reformulations appear:

- WW, in line 11, asks for specification to avoid generalization: "in Poland or you mean generally."
- In line 14, WW exposes the momentary nature of his opinion: "well I haven't really thought about it."
- In line 16, WW emphasizes the personal character of his evaluation and its limitations and hypothetical nature: The formulation "as far as I'm aware" is repeated and thus emphasized: "as far as far as I'm

aware I think in Poland you're more like likely to get jobs through connections."

- The utterance in line 22 aims at the direct exposition of the limitations of the speaker's knowledge: "I don't I don't know everything."
- In line 28: "yes uh I think (.) almost certainly this is more true," WW modifies his agreement with JS's strong categorizing evaluations by hesitation markers, "I think" and a mixed downgrade: "almost certainly."

Such reformulating actions accompanied by hedges construe the Polish collective identity as an open group category to be negotiated, as opposed to a more closed group categorization construing speakers in constrained monocultural group identity.

Reformulations

Excerpt 2. WW – JS interview

33. JS =OK
 34. WW eh
 35. JS eh
 36. WW [so this this is a guess
 37. JS [and
 38. JS mhm
 39. WW from what people [say they
 → 40. JS [so you think it's a: a cha/
 41. it's a problem which is eh characteristic for
 42. Poland do you think that Poland is a breeding
 43. ground for it'
 → 44. WW eh::m well I would imagine that(.) ehm that ehm
 45. maybe it's a problem for former communist country
 46. (.)

JS's reformulating actions, lines 40–3, serve to negotiate deeper intersubjectivity. Actually, they function as an upgrade of WW's categorization, probably to bring the categorization problem to the foreground. This argumentatively oriented action allows WW to repair whatever implied categorization might have been understood by JS. As a result of this the

category can be relativized, so that JS's argumentative upgrade acts as a negotiation opening and a mediative action. WW uses repairs by modifying his evaluation (lines 44–5) and producing an indirect categorization. There is a hesitation "eh::m" and a "well" marker introducing an argumentative reformulation. Also, WW uses modality ("I would imagine," "maybe"), thus opening up JS's categorization for negotiation and reformulating the collective category in terms of system and state conditions.

Recapitulations and Sum Ups

The analysis of excerpt 3 aims at illustrating the influence of recapitulations and sum ups in effective mediation.

Excerpt 3. WW – JS interview

80. JS and ehm do you think that eh Polish government
 81. eh:: (.) could (.) reduce the scale of the
 82. problem and (.) if (.) yes
 83. WW well [I I wouldn't I wouldn't it's bound to the
 84. JS [what could be
 85. WW Polish government I would imagine that what
 86. would change it would be more foreign companies
 87. coming to Poland
 88. JS mhm
 → 89. WW and eh using (.) objective (.) eh (.) methods of
 90. improvement (...) well (...) I mean if you think
 91. about it it doesn't make sense to employ people
 92. because you know them (.) it makes more sense
 93. to employ people because they're good
 → 94. JS oah so eh didn't you ever help eh your relative
 95. or a friend yh when yh he was eh:: in need (.)
 → 96. and you (.) had eh: the ability to: to do
 97. something
 98. WW yeah well Ok I I I have my own business here
 99. yeah'
 100. (.)
 → 101. JS m:mhm=
 102. WW =and(.)so
 → 103. JS oh yeah so [if you can (xxx)
 104. WW [okey okey they're good

105. (.)
- 106. WW [so I'm not talking about I'm not going to
107. JS [it doesn't (manage) how I'm not talking about in
108. Poland
109. WW yeah right
110. (.)
111. WW I wouldn't employ anybody here (..) just because
112. they were a friend or a relative because of they
113. couldn't do their jobs very well I would lose
114. money (.) I mean that's obvious
115. (.)
- 116. JS oah yes [but don't you yh::
- 117. WW [so I mean
- 118. WW oops .hhhh
119. (.)
- 120. JS isn't yh more important for you for example
121. this (..) help to a friend]
122. (.)
- 123. JS you would [be you would BE ABLE to be objective]
124. WW [eh/ of course not
125. JS yh[: (xxxx)
- 126. WW [well it depends when OK but this thi/ yeah but
127. this my own business
128. (.)
129. WW so (.) I mean I'm not going to I'm not going to
130. damage my business (.) by [employing somebody
131. JS [well
132. WW unsuitable
- 133. JS yeah but: (.) for example if you had ehm:: (.) a:
134. (.) high m: (.) high position eh: somewhere and
135. you could use it to:: I don't know to for example
136. if you were eh::m
137. WW well I don't know I w- [I would yh
138. JS [working
- 139. WW >just wait a minute< I would say that it's the
140. market(.)that forces people to employ people
141. according to ability
142. JS mhm

JS manages to construe an argumentative category for herself by problematizing indirect categorizations that appear throughout the interview in such a way so as to avoid getting stuck in a polarized and adversarial mode of the discussion. This allows her to continually renew the socio-cognitive conflict and simultaneously probe more relativized perspectives in the dialogue. JS assumes an even deeper interactive stance, once she realizes WW cannot make sense of the Polish perspective. In lines 133–9, JS starts hypothesizing to make it easier for WW to embrace this perspective, as it unravels in the interview: “yeah but: (.) for example if you had ehm:: (.) a: (.) high m: (.) high position eh: somewhere and you could use it to:: I don't know to for example if you were eh::m.”

However, in all actions starting in lines 94, 97, 103, 116, 120, JS relies on an inductive style of formulating argumentative utterances: she either formulates them as questions or deprives them of sum ups or clear points. Throughout the interview a fight for conversational control can be observed. There are a lot of competitive latches (overlapped turns) by means of which speakers fight for the turn. The overlapping talk tends to be initiated by an interviewee WW, as for example in lines 117, 126. Additionally, he produces more direct regulating actions to control the flow of the interview, for example in line 139: “>just wait a minute<.” WW's communicative style and JS's way of making points frame JS as a conversationally dominated interviewer, a role contradictory by definition of the interview genre. From the point of view of successful mediation, this style invokes a problematic identity for both WW and JS. On the one hand, an inductive way of making points enables JS to create a interactive interviewer role, since she leaves conversational openings for possible negotiation on the part of the communicative partner, but on the other hand, she in fact becomes susceptible to the loss of interactional and thematic control.

JS and WW revert from time to time to the student/teacher role in the traditional communicative relation in the classroom, in which the teacher controls turn taking and the subject. From the point of view of traditional sociolinguistics, such asymmetric interactive pattern tends to appear in communicative relations in which a) type roles exercise greater interactive control than b) type roles, where:

- 1) is a native speaker of English/teacher/older person/male;

2) is a nonnative speaker, especially Polish/student/younger person/female.

The first problem with those macro social categories from the point of view of constructivist approaches is that it is quite risky to assume their influence on the actual communicative action, unless the analysis provides evidence that interaction participants assume some of those roles as relevant for the interaction at hand. From the point of view of foreign language learning, the notion of interactive roles and an identity construed in the interaction will be analytically more useful and less problematic at this stage of the research. For further discussion see Psathas (1999).

Negotiating Collective Categorizations

Excerpt 4. WW – JS interview

- 370. WW yes but I think I think Polish people got very
371. negative attitude to to business and a very
372. negative atti[tude to (business) in general
→ 373. JS [do you think they're lazy
→ 374. WW no but they're just negative
375. (1.0)
376. WW eh::m because(.)[I mean if you take yes but if
377. JS [(possibly)
378. WW you take Poland(.)anybody that wants to set up a
379. business in Poland can do so for about a twenty
380. percent of the cost of setting up a business in
381. England (.) because English People are paid five
382. times more
383. JS mhm
384. WW so Poland has a huge competitive advantage(.)
385. compared to countries in the west (1.0) no I mean
386. it's true
387. (1.0)
388. WW you know property is much cheaper labor is much
389. cheaper
390. JS mhm
→ 391. WW so you know y- y- you've got really massive
392. advantage in here but because ehm I think a lot

393. of Polish people ehm think that this is
394. impossible things are so terrible I will never
395. succeed etcetera that they don't make
396. use of their competitive advantages
→ 397. JS you think that (...) our national feat- eh
398. feature↑ (.) it's eh::m ..)
→ 399. WW well I mean probably it's it's due to the past
400. then it's due to (.) you know communism or
401. whatever=
402. JS =mhm
403. (1.5)
404. JS °perhaps°
405. (1.0)
→ 406. WW woah I mean OK may- maybe I'm very rude but for
407. example I think (.) yeah for example in America
408. Americans have a can do philosophy and Polish
409. people have a can't do philosophy
410. (.)
→ 411. JS yes uh:: yes it's right I think that eh:
412. American citizens are eh more eh:: active:
413. they feel more:
R 414. WW oh [no I mean they're willing they're willing
415. JS [xxx
416. WW to take risks
→ 417. (3.0)
→ 418. WW I mean y- you (..) the only way that you will
419. make money is if you would dare take a risk
→ 420. JS maybe they feel more ehm (0.5) ts more:: able to:
421. face eh challenges↑ or↑
422. WW well I think also and (.) I think a lot of Polish
423. people wo- you know young Polish people (.)
→ 424. whereas the general idea has the more highly
425. qualified I am etcetra etcetra (.) you know the
426. better I will be in job but really in many jobs
427. (.) eh: people don't really care about your
428. academic qualification

WW produces a culturally oriented collective categorization in lines 370–2: “yes but I think I think Polish people got very negative attitude to business and a very negative attitude to (business) in general.” The ac-

tion becomes a source of trouble as it enhances the monocultural character of social identities and hinders mediation. JS does not negotiate WW's collective other categorizations, she even confirms them by delivering an agreeing upgrade of WW's evaluating categorization, lines 411: "yes uh:: yes it's right I think that eh: American citizens are eh more eh::: active: they feel more." As a result, in this fragment JS loses topic control over the interview.

In line 373, JS's uses the interrogative reformulation "do you think they're lazy," intending to probe WW's categorization, which turns it into a negotiative action. However, she uses the pronoun "they" and thus distances herself from the categorized group. Negotiation is dropped because of this and WW's categorizations become more closed and more direct.

In line 397, JS says: "you think that . . . our national feat- eh featuref (.) it's eh::m." The use of pronoun "our" reformulates the collective Polish category into more direct terms, exposing the collective national identity "our" as hers. In this way JS opens the category for a renewed negotiation, since in lines 399, WW initiates a collective category repair: "well I mean probably it's it's due to the past then it's due to (.) you know communism or whatever." There is a repair marker "well" followed by a slight downgrade of his earlier utterance, and the final confirmation.

In lines 402-5 another problem appears: JS gives up active negotiation at this point. She produces pauses expressing doubts and very silently utters "perhaps," which is a downgraded, weak agreement with WW's category formulation. In the outcome, WW enhances his collective categorization of Poles. As it is a polarized and closed category, it threatens mediation, as in lines 406-9: "woah I mean OK may- maybe I'm very rude but for example I think Americans have a can do philosophy and Polish (.) yeah for example in America people have a can't do philosophy." WW responds somehow to the problematic nature of such categorization because he modifies it by an exclamation ("woah"), a reformulation marker ("I mean OK"), a hesitation and a repetition ("may-maybe"), as well as by directly evaluating his action as possibly troublesome ("maybe I'm very rude") and finally by marking his argument as an example, not a generalization ("for example in America").

One can observe how mediation can be hindered by framing oneself or a communicative partner in any type of collective categorization,

especially a socio-culturally oriented one. The reason is that such categorizations enhance the monocultural character of social identities.

Conclusion

If mediation is based, among other things, on construing the socio-cultural partnership in the dialogue, a serious threat for mediation would be posed by losing control over the interaction and letting one interaction participant dominate the other one. The following conversational actions were observed to function as cooperative strategies of deepening intersubjectivity in intercultural communication and creating an intercultural identity:

- Exposing one's perspective or trying to make the other person realize how their categorizing actions affect the other interaction participant;
- Reformulating categories into more direct or individualized ones. Problematizing them by means of argumentative actions was based first on probing the partner's perspective or deeper, active listenership;
- Reaching partnership in interactive and topic control. Avoiding to dominate the other person interactively.

Generally speaking, an effective strategy of taking up conversational control and conducting effective mediation comes down to combining two aspects of a communicative action, namely creating an argumentative stance on the one hand and developing a deeper understanding on the other.

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MARTA DĄBROWSKA

Attitudes to English as a Second and as a Foreign Language

The subject of my paper has emerged from my professional and private contacts with people worldwide, which are carried out most of the time by means of English, the contemporary language of international communication. Nowadays it would be impossible to disagree that, willy-nilly, we are experiencing a global rule of the English language (cf. Phillipson 1992). English is spoken in all corners of the world; however, a closer scrutiny of the language used in various parts of the globe and various contexts shows immediately that it is not a uniform entity by any means, and for this reason a new term *Englishes* has been coined to at least partly capture a number of its distinctive varieties (cf. Platt, Weber, and Ho 1984; Kachru 1988; Mesthrie 2000). Kachru (1988) in particular attempted to analyse the diverse character of the varieties of English spoken round the globe, and as a result postulated a very helpful classification of those into three categories:

- 1) *The inner circle*, i.e. the countries in which English is the first language (Great Britain, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand).
- 2) *The outer circle*, which includes some post-colonial countries with English as one of the official languages beside the indigenous tongues (e.g. some African territories, the Indian subcontinent and the countries of the Pacific). These are the varieties which are commonly referred to as the *New Englishes* (cf. Platt, Weber, and Ho 1984; Mesthrie 2000; Stockwell 2002).

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