GERMAN-CHINESE INTERACTIONS DIFFERENCES IN CONTEXTUALIZATION CONVENTIONS AND RESULTING MISCOMMUNICATION¹

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1. Introduction

Suppose you are working as a visiting professor at a Chinese university. One late afternoon you are taking a walk around campus. A Chinese colleague approaches you, saying: "Hello, Ms. X (Mr. Y). Have you already eaten?" You would probably interpret this utterance as a pre-sequence to a subsequent invitation for dinner. Full of expectations you answer: "No, not yet". However, to your astonishment your colleague replies: "Well, then I don't want to disturb you any longer. You surely must be very hungry."²

What happened? The Chinese speaker of English translated the Chinese routine formula for greeting *Chi guo le ma?* (*Have you already eaten?*) word for word from Chinese into English. You, however, interpreted this formula on the basis of your cultural conventions as an introduction to an invitation for dinner.

The lack of knowledge of cultural conventions of communication and interaction norms can have much more serious consequences than in our example, where one might have been rather disappointed and as a result of the interaction classify the Chinese colleague as a "strange person". Not seldom intercultural differences in communication determine the outcome of economic and political negotiations, personal encounters and professional success.

2. Culturally specific patterns of interpretation and the concept of contextualization

In his phenomenological essay "The Stranger" Alfred Schütz (1944) analyzes the typical situation in which "strangers" find themselves in their attempt to interpret the cultural pattern of a social group which they approach and to orient themselves within it. In this situation the so far unquestioned and taken for granted schemes for interpreting the social world no longer function as a system of tested recipes at hand: The hitherto available cultural recipes and their efficiency as well as the typical attitudes required by them are no longer unquestioned "matter of course" which give both security and assurance. Instead, the knowledge that has been taken for granted until now and has provided trustworthy recipes for interpreting the social world - working, on the one hand, as a precept for actions and thus serving as a scheme of expression, and serving, on the other hand, as a scheme of interpretation - becomes unworkable and a "crisis" arises. Strangers experience that neither the schemes of interpretation and expression, brought from their culture, nor the underlying basic assumptions concerning the "thinking as usual" are any longer valid within the approached group. They lack the type of knowledge that is required for the interpretation of the new group's ways of interacting. As Schütz (1944: 104) states,

¹ I would like to thank Allison Wetterlin and Jennifer Hartog for their comments on the English translation.

² This example stems from my own experience as a lecturer at a Chinese university.

"... the cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master."

Strangers usually find within the scheme of reference brought along from their own cultural background some ready-made ideas of the pattern supposedly valid within the approached group and in order to interpret the other's behavior they try to apply these ready-made pictures and stereotypes of the foreign group. However, they prove their inadequacy, as the knowledge they offer "serves merely as a handy scheme of interpreting the foreign group and not as a guide for interaction between the two groups" (Schütz 1944: 98).

Cultural schemes of orientation, based on social knowledge and past experience are important constituents of our schemata of interpretation and consequently, conventions of interacting and culture are strongly intertwined. Culture, cultural membership and differences do not constitute entities separated from the process of interaction, but are constructed and perpetuated by the participants in the process of interacting. Culture is thus part of the implicit knowledge we rely on to interact with others, to interpret their verbal and nonverbal activities and thereby influences the inferences we draw in the concrete situation. Due to partly different schemata of knowledge the negotiation of interactive meaning turns out to be more difficult in intercultural encounters and frequently leads to systematic communicative misinterpretations.

The concept of *contextualization*, introduced by Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1976), proves to be a very useful theoretical and methodological approach to the analysis of intercultural communication and its insistence on empirical analysis also makes it a very powerful approach for the in-depth-analysis of intercultural miscommunication. This concept implies that interactants construe context in carrying out their interactive activities: By producing a certain verbal or nonverbal activity the interactants enact a context for the interpretation of this particular activity.³ This reflexive notion of context, where context is no longer taken as a given entity, but seen as the outcome of participants' joint effort to make it available, deals with the cognitive processes through which cultural and other types of knowledge are brought into the interpretative process: Speakers do not just produce utterances in order to transmit referential meaning and information, they also contextualize them and make them interpretable by the use of certain empirically detectable features - the so-called *contextualization cues*.⁴ These can be described as a class of verbal and nonverbal signs that serve to relate what is said on any particular occasion to knowledge acquired through past experience. This knowledge enters into the process of conversational inference as part of the background information against which constituent messages can be interpreted. Contextualization cues, which are based on syntactic, lexical, stylistic, and code-bound options, on prosody, gesture, gaze, backchannels etc., do not have referential meaning that could be stated outside of the situated context and the sequential placement of the cues. When the relevant cues are understood by all participants, the interpretative process is taken for granted and tends to go unnoticed. However, when a participant is unaware of the function of certain cues, interpretations may differ and misunderstandings may occur (Gumperz 1982).

What is important for the analysis of intercultural communication is, that the ways of contextualizing meaning and interpreting contextualization cues are shaped by sociocultural conventions. In order to interpret the utterances of my counterpart adequately, I have to recognize the present communicative situation and the embedded contextualization cues as an instance of typified schemata and relate them to my stored sociocultural knowledge. A common repertoire of contextualization conventions is thus an essential prerequisite for communicative cooperation and for the negotiation of interactive meaning. Interactants in intercultural communication often do not share the same contextualization cues and, as my data of interactions between Germans and Chinese will demonstrate, systematic differences in the conventions

³ Cf. Auer 1986; 1990.

⁴ Cf. Auer (1986:22-47).

and principles evolve that guide the way a conversational intention is signalled. In this case the use of culture-specific contextualization conventions can lead to different inferences and render the common negotiation of context and meaning difficult or even impossible.⁵

As Auer (1986) demonstrates, the different types and layers of context evoked through contextualization cues may be subsumed under the following five mnemonic questions:

1. *Are we talking together?*
2. *Who is talking to whom?*
3. *What are we doing together?*
4. *What are we talking about?*
5. *What social and interactional roles and what kind of mutual relationship are we negotiating?*

In order to negotiate a common interactive context the participants' answers to these questions and thus to the different layers of signalling and interpreting context have to be consistent. I shall now outline these five types of context layers and will demonstrate intercultural problems of negotiating meaning related to these five areas. The analysis is based on naturally occurring interactions between Chinese speakers of German and German natives and between Chinese native speakers interacting in Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese). These interactions are part of a larger corpus of data, which consists of:

- 1) 25 audiotaped conversations in German:
 - a. Data collected in the People's Republic of China:
 - Nine conversations among Chinese and German lecturers teaching German at different Chinese universities. These participants met on social occasions ("having tea together"). The Chinese' knowledge of German is advanced. (The transcript segments SU, BAO, QIN, DU and BU stem from these situations).
 - Three conversations during the office-hours of German representatives of German institutions in China. The Chinese participants are scientists who just finished a one-year intensive German class. Their level of German can be described as "intermediate". (The transcript segments ZHENG and MA belong to these interactive situations.)
 - b. Data collected in Germany:
 - Thirteen informal conversations (coffee chats) among Chinese and German students, studying at German universities. The German of these Chinese students is fairly advanced. (The conversation WU is part of this corpus).
- 2) Three informal interactions between Chinese speakers (in Chinese).

The conversations lasted between 12 and 125 minutes.

2.1. Contextualizing conversational involvement

The first question *Are we talking together?* concerns the contextualization cues responsible for the maintenance of focussed interaction and conversational involvement. Recipient behavior turns out to be a relevant cue in this respect. Different cultures show different conventions in the ways of signalling and interpreting conversational involvement and active listenership.⁶ My data show a striking difference between German and Chinese recipients' frequency of producing minimal responses such as "mhm" or "ja".⁷

⁵ Communication problems based on different interpretations of contextualization cues are of course not limited to intercultural encounters. However, they seem to show up regularly in these encounters and can be systematically connected to different systems of interaction conventions.

⁶ Maynard (1986) points out that Japanese recipients produce three times as many minimal responses as their American counterparts.

⁷ In the Chinese-Chinese data there are even fewer minimal responses (Günthner 1993a). For similar results on minimal responses used by Chinese recipients in Chinese-American interactions see Tao/Thompson (1991).

In the following transcript the German B tells the Chinese Su and Yao about her friend Frau Peiper:

- SU 1
 26B: die - die Frau Peiper ist - von Beruf Optikerin.
Mrs. Peiper is - an optician.
 27Su: ah Optik'
ah optic'
 28B: Optikerin. und hat einen Laden.
optician. and has a shop.
 29 also ein Geschäft.
in other words a store.
 30 (0.3)
 31 und nebenher hat sie mit fünfundfünfzig Jahren
and besides that she started with fifty-five years
 32 angefangen zu studieren.
to study at the university.
 33 (0.8)
 34 also sie studiert.
so she attends university.
 35 und hat einen Optikerladen.
and has an optician's shop.
 36 und jetzt macht sie
and now she is
 37 zum ersten Mal in ihrem Leben drei Wochen Urlaub.
for the first time in her life on a three week-holiday-trip.
 38 (0.3)
 39 in China.
in China.

The fact that "expected" minimal responses do not appear at syntactically and prosodically marked listening-response relevant-moments (28; 29; 32; 34; 35; 37), is made accountable by B's verbal behavior: She interprets this absence as contextualization cue for comprehension problems and reacts by recycling and paraphrasing her own utterances, providing repetitions and further explanations. In line 28-29 she substitutes the term "Laden" for "Geschäft". When still no minimal responses show up (line 31-33), B reduces the degree of complexity of her utterance and repeats the propositional content on a more elementary level: "so she attends university and has an optician's shop". The speaker's reaction to the absence of response is very similar to the observations of Erickson/Shultz (1982): If there are no recipients' responses occurring at listening-response relevant-moments, speakers will not proceed to the next unit of speaking activity but will persist in reiterating the same point. Reformulations, hyperexplanations and lowering the level of abstraction are the communicative strategies speakers then apply.

The following transcript also demonstrates the different ways of "doing listening" between the German U and Chinese Wu:

- WU 1
 5Wu: also ich: habe (1.5) (ein) (1.0) nur
well I: have (1.5) (a) (1.0) only
 6 ganz wenige Male bei einer deutschen
very few times been at a German
 7 Familie gewesen.
family's home.
 8U: ja
yeah.
 9Wu: also ich kenne nur oberflächlich ('H'H'H'H)

- 10 *so I know only superficially ('H'H'H'H)*
die deutsche Familie aber
the German family but
- 11U: mhm
mhm
- 12Wu: sehr eh (...) ich sehr gut miteinander eh' zwischen
very eh (...) I very good together eh' between
- 13U: mhm mhm
mhm mhm
- 14Wu: Familienmitglieder.
the members of the family.
- 15U: mhm
mhm
- 16Wu: aber ich weiß nicht eh wie sieht also
but I don't know eh what looks
- 17 eigentlich wie sieht HINTERher die Familie
actually what the family looks BEHIND
- 18U: der ALLTAG
the EVERYDAY LIFE
- 19Wu: eh die die die die Beziehung zwischen
eh the the the the relationship between
- 20 /der Familienmitglieder/ oder erzählen Sie mir
/the members of the family/ or tell me
- 21U: /mhm mhm mhm/
/mhm mhm mhm/
- 22Wu: kurz über die, die eh die ehm /Sache/
a little about the, the eh the ehm /matter/
- 23U: /mhm/
/mhm/
- 24Wu: über die (H' H') eh Familie, deutsche Familie
about the (H' H') eh family, German family
- 25 zum Beispiel die (1.5) Beziehung zwischen
for example the (1.5) relationship between
- 26 der Kinder der eh eh' zwischen dem Kinder
the children the eh eh' between the children
- 27 und der Eltern (H')
and the parents (H')
- 28U: mhm
mhm
- 29Wu: insbesondere wenn der Kinder erwachsen ist.
especially when the children is grown up.
- 30 wie sieht die Beziehung zwischen die Kinder
what is the relationship between the children
- 31 /der/ eh und der Eltern aus'
/the/ eh and the parents like'
- 32U: /mhm/
/mhm/
- 33U: also, ich kenns jetzt SO aus: MEINER Erfahrung daß:
well, I can say from: MY own experience that:
- 34 die (1.5) eh: (2.0) Kinder'(1.5) sehr (2.0)
the (1.5) eh: (2.0) children'(1.5) are (2.0)
- 35 eh nach SCHEMEN ERZOGEN werden, nach gewissen eh
eh BROUGHT UP according to SCHEMATA, in order to eh
- 36 zum gewissen VERHALTEN hin (-)
show a certain BEHAVIOR (-)
- 37 also wie sie sich später verhalten SOLLEN
that is how they are SUPPOSED to or MUST
- 38 oder MÜSSEN nach der Meinung der ELTERN (-)
behave later on according to the opinion of the PARENTS (-)

- 39 und daß die Eltern dann (1.0) ihnen versuchen
and that the parents then (1.0) try for them
 40 also den Kindern des mitzugeben auf den Weg, (-)
I mean for the children to give them for their lives(-)
 41 wie sie sich später verhalten sollen wie sie sich
the models how they should behave or
 42 verhalten KÖNNEN in der Gesellschaft später (0.3)
CAN behave later on in the society (0.3)
 43 un:d (4.0) es 's eigentlich für MICH jetzt schwierig
an:d (4.0) it's actually difficult for ME now
 44 darüber jetzt was zu sagen weil ich (0.3)
to talk about this right now cause I (0.3)
 45 KANN mir's auf der einen Seite nicht anders
CANnot imagine on the one side
 46 vorstellen wie's zum Beispiel, anders gemacht
how for example it could be
 47 werden könnte. (0.5)
done differently (0.5)
 48 also zum Beispiel des Verhältnis Kinder Eltern (1.8)
take for example the relationship between children
 49 also s'ist eh zumindest also bis zu
and parents (1.8) this is eh at least until
 50 DEM Zeitpunkt wo die Kinder aus'm Haus gehn,
THE time when the children leave home
 51 isses n' ERZIEHUNGSPROZEß, da ermöglichen
until then it's a process of EDUCATING them, during those years
 52 di Ki' eh die Eltern den Kindern zum Beispiel
the ch' eh the parents make it possible for the children for
 53 also die Schulbildung (0.3) eh (0.3)
example to go to school (0.3) eh (0.3)
 54 gewisse Verhaltens eh: Schemen un'
certain schemata eh: of how to act an'
 55 und Mustern (-) wie sie sich anziehen haben
and patterns (-) how to dress
 56 wie sie sich zu benehmen haben
how to behave
 57 anderen Menschen gegenüber (0.3)
towards other people (0.3)
 58 undso weiter halt.
andso on, you see.

In the first part of the transcript, U, who then has the interactive role of the recipient, produces his minimal responses "mhm", "mhm mhm" and "ja" on a very regular rhythmic basis after informational phrases⁸ (8; 28; 64; 66). In line 33 the participation framework changes and U takes over the speaker's role. Then, however, the interactive rhythm changes: frequent pauses appear and hardly any minimal responses are produced. The flow of talk stagnates, and U keeps on recycling parts of his utterances, providing explanations (40-42), offering examples (46-48; 55-57) and initiating repairs. In line 35, he changes the terminology from "BROUGHT UP according to SCHEMATA" to "show a certain BEHAVIOR". Still not having received any recipient reaction after the pause (-), he reformulates his utterance at a lower level of abstraction: "that is how they are SUPPOSED to or MUST behave later on according to the opinion of the PARENTS" (line 37-38). In line 49-51, U formulates the thesis that "until THE time when the children leave home.. it's a process of EDUCATING them". When he receives no backchannel signals, he goes on by providing examples to concretize this thesis: "the parents make it possible for the children for example to go to school" (51-53). After

⁸ The term "informational phrase" is based on Gumperz/Berenz (1990:5). "Informational phrases" are defined as syntactically, prosodically and semantically marked units of talk.

still not receiving any minimal response, he even goes more into details "how to dress how to behave toward other people". Thus, informational phrases are produced without being met by signs of "continuers".

The striking difference in frequency of minimal responses between the German and Chinese participants cannot be explained by possible comprehension problems, because the Chinese participants in both interactions (SU and WU) speak German fairly well (Su is lecturer of German at a Chinese university and Wu is studying at a German university). Furthermore, when we look at Chinese-Chinese conversations, recipient responses (such as "en, ai, jiushi, dui") are seldomly found. We often find longer passages of one speaker talking without receiving any backchannel token from the recipient.

The following transcript segment, taken from an informal conversation between the two Chinese Liang and Zhang, will illustrate this "absence" of minimal responses in Chinese interactions:

LIANG 1

- 5Liang: 我觉得嘛, 像 我们 在这个地方
 wo juede ma, xiang women zai zhe ge difang
I mean (part.), like us at this place
- 6 学了一年 的德语,
 xuele yi nian de deyu,
we learnt German for one year,
- 7 虽然 是一年 过去了 但是 我们 觉得
 suiran shi yi nian guoqule danshi women juede
although one year passed but we think
- 8 我们 现在 的德语水平 还没有, 远远 没有,
 women xianzai de deyu shuiping hai meiyou, yuanyuan meiyou,
our present level of German still has not, is still far far from
- 9 达到 我们 当时 所 能 想 像 的那个水平
 dadao women dangshi suo neng xiangxiang de neige shuiping.
the level we formerly imagined we could reach.
- 10 而且 以 我们 现在 的德语水平
 erqie yi women xianzai de deyu shuiping
besides, with the level of our German now
- 11 到 德国 去 学习 可能 困难 很 大
 dao deguo qu xuexi, keneng kunnan hen da.
if we go to Germany to study perhaps the problems will be very big.
- 12 你 认为 怎 么 样
 ni renwei zenme yang?
what do you think?
- 13Zhang: 第一个, 我 觉得 这个 语言 嘛 是 没有 止 境 的
 di yige, wo juede zhege yuyan ma shi meiyou zhijing de.
first of all I think this language (part.) has no limits.
- 14 就 是 你 在 这 儿 多 学 半 年
 jiushi ni zai zher duo xue bannian
even when you still study here for another half a year
- 15 你 也 不 能 说 你 的 德语 是 非 常 好 了
 ni ye bu neng shuo ni de deyu shi feichang hao le.

you still cannot say your German is very good.

- 16 可以完全 在德国 一点 困难 也 没有
 keyi wanquan zai deguo yidian kunnan ye meiyou.
then still it won't be that you have no problems when you are in Germany.

- 17 进入 学习 和 生活 嗯
 jinru xuexi he shenghuo, en,
concerning going there, studying and living there, hm,

- 18 第二个呢, 我 觉得, 嗯, 诶, 如果你到 是
 di erge ne, wo jue de, en, ze, ruguo ni dao shi
secondly (part.), I mean, eh, ah, when you

- 19 嗯, 到 德国 去 学习 嗯, 德语呢,
 en, dao deguo qu xuexi, en, deyu ne,
hm, go to Germany to learn German (part.),

- 20 主要 是 应付 一些 日常 会话 啊 什么 的
 zhuyao shi yingfu yixie richang huihua a shenme de.
it is important to be able to communicate in everyday life (part.) and so on.

- 21 做为 专业 上 的话, 虽然 你的 德语 不够,
 zuowei zhuan ye shang de hua, suiran ni de deyu bu gou,
now concerning the field we specialized in, although your German is not enough,

There are no minimal responses shown after the completion of intonational and informational phrases (such as 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 20).

As both the German-Chinese and Chinese-Chinese conversations in my data suggest, German and Chinese recipients display different styles of signalling active listenership, which lead to misinterpretations and disturbances during such intercultural conversations: The German recipients regularly provide backchannel tokens in the function of "continuers"⁹ which serve to encourage the speaker to continue. Chinese recipients, by contrast, hardly ever use backchannel tokens in the function of "continuers", but produce them as signals of agreement, understanding or of their willingness to take over the floor.¹⁰

In their study of backchannels in Mandarin conversations Tao/Thompson (1991) report a similar observation concerning the differences in providing backchannels in English and Mandarin:

"Our first finding was a striking difference between Mandarin and English in frequency of backchannels. Counting speaker changes as any change in speakership, whether in overlap or not, we found that 63 out of 271 (25%) of the speaker changes in the English data were backchannel responses, while in the Mandarin data only 10 out of 119 (8%) of the Mandarin speaker changes were backchannel responses. These findings strongly suggest that English makes much more use of backchannels as a conversation strategy than does Mandarin." (Tao/Thompson 1991:211)

Another difference in the ways of contextualizing conversational involvement includes what I call "recipient echos". These other-repetitions, which prosodically and lexically imitate the previous speaker's utterance, are only employed by the Chinese recipients.

The following segment is taken from an interaction between the Chinese Fan and her German colleague S. They are talking about the situation of women in China and Germany:

⁹ Schegloff (1981).

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of differences in backchannel behavior between German and Chinese recipients, see Günthner (1993b).

- FAN 5
 13S: ja wissen Sie in Deutschland ist es schon sehr SCHWIERIG. =
you know in Germany it is very DIFFICULT. =
 14Fan: = sehr SCHWIERIG.
= very DIFFICULT.
 15S: ja. wenn die Frau ein Kind hat.
yes. when a woman has a child.
 16 (0.5)
 17 hh' es gibt einfach zu wenig Kinderein' Kinderbetreuungsplätze.
hh' there are just too few childri' child care places.
 18 und die Regierung macht NICHTS.
and the government isn't doing ANYTHING about it.
 19Fan: macht NICHTS.
isn't doing ANYTHING about it.

The echos (line 14 and 19), which do not only repeat lexically, parts of the prior turn but also prosodically, duplicate the focussed elements and thus the "new" (comment) part of the preceding utterance ("very DIFFICULT"; "doesn't do ANYTHING about it"). With the repetition of the formerly "new" information, it can now be treated as interactively established and part of the common cognitive orientation.

The following transcript is part of an office-hour conversation between F, the German representative of a German institution and Zheng, a Chinese student of German:

- ZHENG 7
 1F: H' die PNdS ist eine Prüfung, auf die
H' the PNdS is an exam, for which
 2 muß man sich geZIELT vorbereiten
you have to prepare THROUGhly
 3Zheng: geZIELT vorbereiten =
prepare THROUGhly=
 4F: = ja. ja. - und das dauert Zeit - ne'
= yeah. yeah. - and this takes time - right'
 5Zheng: dauert Zeit ne'
takes time right'
 ...
 ...
 37F: ehm (0.7) ehm (0.5) und müssen
ehm (0.7) ehm (0.5) and must
 38 dann WIEDERGEHEN, was in dem TEXT ist
then REPEAT, what is in the TEXT
 39Zheng: ja. - nur /hauptsäch/lich
yeah. - only /the main points/
 40F: /und zwar/ möglichst ALLES
/and/ if possible ALL
 41Zheng: möglich AL/LES/
if possible ALL/

Similar recipient echos are being employed in the Chinese data as well.

In the conversation HAN two Chinese native speakers (Han and Fan) interact in Chinese:

- HAN 2
 1Han: 各种 的国人 这个 谈话 的时候
ge zhong de guoren zhege tanhua de shihou
when several people talk together
 2 打得手 势
dade shoushi
make gestures

- 3Fan: 打的手势
 dade shoushi
 make gestures
- 4Han: 打的手势 不一样
 dade shoushi bu yiyang
 make gestures not the same
- 5Fan: 不一样
 bu yiyang.
 not the same.

Such echo-strategies are to be interpreted in the context of Chinese facework-strategies: They signal - as my Chinese informants point out - deference, politeness, and respect for the previous speaker. They are a rhetoric strategy of what is called "di san xia si" 低三下四 (submissive, humble)-behavior, symbolizing a conversational "koutou" (kowitz) to one's conversational partner. Through imitative repetition more sequential weight is put on the utterance of the interlocutor and it is thereby reflected as being very important.

2.2. Contextualizing particular participant constellations

The second question "Who is talking to whom?" subsumes contextualization cues evoking the context of particular "participant constellations". Besides the choice of linguistic code, dialect, or register, the aspect of recipient design¹¹ also belongs to this category, that is, the design of the utterance with an orientation to the background knowledge and cognitive state of the recipients. Speakers usually model their utterances on what they assume to be the recipients' knowledge and thereby take into consideration what information is given and what is new. Speakers are normally - as Bachtin (1979: 175) points out - endeavored to "orient their word with its specific horizon to the horizon of the recipient". For participants in intercultural communication, who often come from very different life-worlds, it is difficult to assess what kind of social knowledge can be presupposed and what needs further explanation. The limits of commonly shared patterns of experience have to be continually investigated, since in intercultural communication the idealization of "the assumption concerning the congruence of relevance systems" (Schütz&Luckmann 1979) due to similar experiences might turn out to be problematic. The design of the utterance can be inadequate in two ways: the speaker might over- or underestimate the shared knowledge and thus the utterance may be either not informative enough or too elaborate. In the case of an overestimation the interactants initiate a repair sequence.

In following segment is taken from a conversation between the German lecturer S and Bao, a teacher of German at a Chinese university:

BAO 5

- 1Bao: wir Schinesen denken, eine eine ja Frau an der Macht
 we Chinese think, a a yeah a woman in power
- 2 ist nicht gut. Sie sehen wie zum Bei zum Beispiel ZIQI.
 is not good. you see like for ex for example ZIQI.
- 3S: ja? wer ist Zi? eh Ziqi? wer ist das?
 ja? who is Zi? eh Ziqi? who is that?
- 4Bao: kennst eh kennen Sie nicht ZIQI?
 don't you know ZIQI?
- 5S: nei:n. Zi:qi? nein.
 no:. Zi:qi? no.
- 6Bao: sie war die ja Kaiserwit' Kaiserwitwe aus der ja QING Dynastie
 she was the ja king's wid' king's widow during the ja QING dynasty

¹¹ Cf. Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson (1974:727).

7S: wann hat sie denn gelebt?
when did she live?

The following transcript segment - which is part of an interaction between the German M, who has already spent nine months in China and the Chinese Qin - presents an underestimation of the recipient's background knowledge:

QIN 1

- 16Qin: auch die Studienreform.
also the reform of the university.
 17M: mhm.
 18Qin: ich glaube vor der Kulturrevolution'
I believe before the cultural revolution'
 19 ++ja Sie wissen sicher++ die Kulturrevolution?
++ yeah you surely know++ the cultural revolution?
 20M: haha/ha ein weit ((HI)) verbreitetes ((HI)) Thema ((HI))/ *haha/ha a very ((HI)) common ((HI)) topic ((HI))*
 21Q: /hi hahahahahahahahahahhhhhahaha/
 22M&Q: hahaahahahahahahahhhahahahahah
 23M: /wenn man/
/when you/
 24Qin: /ja vor/ der Kulturrevolution ja, dann
/yeah before/ the cultural revolution yeah, then
 25 werden ja auch die Absolventen aus der
the graduates from middle SCHOOL were sent
 26 MittelSCHULE ja direkt - zur Universität geschickt
yeah directly - to university

Qin's inquiring about the "cultural revolution" (18-19), which is prosodically marked by an increase of tempo "++ yeah you surely know++ the cultural revolution?", demonstrates his uncertainty regarding the repertoire of knowledge of his German partner. M reacts to this over-explicitness by laughing. For Germans who are interested in China and especially for those who live there, the assumption they might not know about the "cultural revolution" seems rather "absurd". For Qin, however, the fact that a foreigner living in China knows about the cultural revolution does not seem to be taken for granted. Underestimating the knowledge of the recipient and consequently employing "talking-down"-techniques might turn out to be more face-threatening than overestimating their knowledge.

2.3. Contextualizing conversational activity types

The third question "What are we doing together?" concerns the activity types presently relevant for the interaction. Contextualization cues working on this layer of context may evoke specific sequential formats (adjacency pairs etc.) or larger speech activities and genres (such as argumentation, narrative, gossip). In addition, this questions deals with cues that establish the "key" of an utterance, for example if an utterance is supposed to be interpreted as joking, ironic, serious etc.

In intercultural communication differences in the function, structure and stylistic assessment of particular genres can clash. The choice of a genre that might be used to serve a certain interactive function in our culture, might turn out to be inadequate in a different cultural setting.

In my data Chinese speakers frequently refer to proverbial sayings in order to back up their arguments.¹²

¹² See Günthner (1991) on the use of proverbial sayings in Chinese interactions.

In the following transcript excerpt of a conversation between Du and the two German speakers E and A a kind of behavior is at stake which varies from culture to culture:

DU 11

- 1E: und zum Beispiel wenn Frauen verheiratet sind
and for example when women are married
 2 (-) und unglücklich sind, oder Schwierigkeiten haben,
- and are unhappy, or when they have problems,
 3 sprechen sie dann mit ihren
would they then
 4 Freundinnen darüber?
consult their women friends?
 5Du: *ja.*
 6E: das schon'
they would'
 7Du: *das schon.*
they would.
 8E: und auch mit ihr/em (Mann)/
and also the/ir (husbands)/
 9Du: /aber auch /nicht sehr viel
/but/ not too much
 10 weil bei uns sagt man eh:::':
because we say eh:::':
 11 JIACHOU BU KE WAIYANG. (0.5)
JIACHOU BU KE WAIYANG. (0.5)
 12 das heißt eh' - die schlimme Sachen
this means eh' - the bad things
 13 in der Familie kann man nicht
of the family should not
 14 eh ja RAUS sa/gen /
eh yeah be told OUT/SIDE/
 15E: /mhm/ so ein Sprichwort
/mhm/ we used
 16 gabs bei uns früher auch (...).
to have a proverb like this too (...).
 17A: ah ja?
ah ja?
 18E: jajaja. bei uns. bei meinen Großeltern (früher ja). mhm.
jajaja. we did. at my grandparents (some time ago ja). mhm.
 19 (1.0)
 20Du: weil man (-) man Angst hat, daß die andere' eh
because one - one is afraid, that the others' eh
 21 Leute eh über sie lach/en/
people eh will laugh at /them/
 22A: /mhm/

The explanation Du gives for her assessment "but not too much" (line 9) and at the same time the explanation for the behavior of Chinese women in general is provided by quoting the Chinese proverb "JIACHOU BU KE WAIYANG" (11) and prefacing it with "because". By reproducing a collectively shared opinion - a folk wisdom - Du contextualizes the fact that the norm encoded in the saying is still valid to date. Experience of the cultural past becomes the model for present action and at the same time the German participants are presented with behavior maxims of another cultural community packaged in a particular genre. The quoted proverb is marked off from the neighboring discourse context by means of increased volume and a particular rhythm (an alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables: JIA CHOU BU KE WAI YANG) and short pauses before and after the saying. Thus, the "reported speech" is set into the running discourse text as a montage, therefore yielding various layers of text (German-Chinese as well as particular rhythmic and prosodic features)(12).

Studies on Chinese rhetorics report that proverbial sayings - Chengyu in particular - are traditionally used to support one's argument, as the power to convince traditionally relies on analogies and on citations of recognized authorities, anecdotes and fables (Granet 1985; Günthner 1991). By employing these highly prestigious genres which are considered as "ornaments" in scientific as well as in argumentative sequences, the speakers demonstrate their good education and show their strong links with traditional norms and forms of wisdom. In their use of proverbial sayings Chinese speakers come close to the ideals of Chinese rhetoric: instead of expressing individual opinions they quote culturally valid patterns and present their own assertions as being part of traditional and still valid collective wisdom.

In everyday conversations German speakers sometimes also use sayings, but in a German context the function of sayings is usually to comment on an event in the past and thus to close a topic¹³ and not to support an argument. Besides, in a German context - at least among intellectuals - with the emphasis on "individualism, personal opinion and originality", the revealing of "unquestioned wisdom" in form of proverbs seems rather dispreferred.

In the following transcript communication problems arise due to the contextualization of interactive modi: joking versus seriousness.

The Chinese Zheng comes to see F, a representative of a German institution, during her office hours in order to talk to her about the forthcoming German language exam (PNdS-exam). As Zheng has problems with listening comprehension, he proposes to smuggle in a tape recorder to the exam:

- ZHENG 9
 12Zheng: ((hohe Stimme)) aber ich eine (.....) eh ich
 ((high pitch)) but I a (.....) eh I
 13 könnte eine eh (mini) tape recorder
 could take along a eh (mini) tape recorder
 14 Kassettenrekorder eh nach eh mitnehmen =
 tape recorder =
 15F: =((schnell)) zur Prüfung?
 =((fast)) to the exam?
 16Zheng: ja'hh
 17F: ((hohe Stimme)) SIND SIE DES WAHNSINNS?
 ((high pitch)) ARE YOU MAD?
 ...
 21F: Sie dürfen keinen eh'h bei der
 you are not allowed to eh' at the
 22 Prüfung wissen Sie, Sie dürfen -
 exam you know, you are
 23 NU:R einen - Stift zum Schreiben mitbringen
 ON:LY allowed to bring along - a pencil to write with
 24Zheng: ja
 25F: und sonst - NICHTS
 and - NOTHING else
 ..
 36Zheng: ha /aber ich könne eine SEHR KLEINE/
 ha/ but I could a VERY SMALL/
 37F: /Sie dürfen NUR EINEN Stift/
 /you are ONLY allowed to bring ONE pencil/
 38 Zheng: SEHR KLEINE eh Aufnahme eh hihhi hier /hhhh/
 VERY SMALL eh tape eh hihhi here /hhhh/
 39F: /ja/

¹³ Quasthoff 1978, Schegloff/Sacks (1974:306) list proverbial formulations of conventional wisdom as one of the techniques for "topic-bounding". Since such formulations "can be agreed on", they can be applied to close down a topic.

- 40F: wissen Sie daß das wissen Sie, daß das auffällt',
you know that, you know, that someone might notice it
 41 in dem Moment eh eh sind SEHR strenge Kontrollen',
at that moment eh eh they have VERY strict controls',
 42 in dem Moment, wo man Sie erwischt, sind Sie
the moment, they catch you, you' ve
 43 DURCHGEFALLEN, fertig, keine DiskuSSION.
FAILED, finished, no discuSSION
 44 (0.5)
 45Zheng: DAS weiß nicht hihihhi hhh/hhhhhhh/
THIS I don't know hihihhi hhh/hhhhhhh/
 46F: /glauben/
/believe/
 47F: /Sie es mir, glauben Sie es mir./
/me. believe me./
 48Zheng: /das ist nur ne das ist nur eine Spaß/
/this is only ne this is only a joke/
 49F: glauben Sie es mir, ich habe hier in
believe me, I already experienced
 50 Wuhan zwei eh - PNdS::: eh Prüfungen
two eh - PNdS::: eh exams
 51 MITerlebt ne
here in Wuhan

The source of misunderstanding here is how the utterances are to be taken - as a joke or as serious. F's reaction clearly shows that she interpreted Zheng's proposal (12-14) as being serious. As Sacks (1972) points out, the determination of the features "joke-serious" is deeply consequential for the analysis of what a speaker is doing and what that implicates for the recipient in the next turn. The interpretation "joke" makes laughing a relevant next action. In our case, however, F demonstrates her indignation and refers to the regulations of the exam. In line 36 Zheng brings up his proposal again by slightly modifying and accentuating it with laugh tokens: "a VERY SMALL VERY SMALL eh tape eh hihihhi". F again interprets this utterance as a serious attempt without perceiving the joking modality contextualized by Zheng. Finally in line 48 Zheng provides the explicit explanation, commenting on the interactive modus: "this is only ne this is only a joke". The reason for this miscommunication is based on F's misinterpretation of Zheng's contextualization cues (high pitch, giggling etc.¹⁴) and different conventions of when to joke on what topic with whom.

2.4. Contextualizing topicality and the organization of information management

The fourth question "What are we talking about?" concerns the organization of discourse pragmatic information. The negotiation of pragmatic meaning affects the interactants' ways of signalling and interpreting the discourse features such as: What is the main point of the message and what is only subsidiary? What knowledge is assumed to be shared? What information is old and what is new? What is the speaker's point of view?

While German and American discourse conventions demand a certain kind of directness concerning the development of the topic, in other rhetoric traditions (such as Chinese) there is much more emphasis on conversational indirection and moving slowly in a rather circular way towards the main statement. From the Chinese perspective the direct way of stating one's opinion in situations where we would expect such a direct statement, is often considered inconsiderate and rude. Instead of directly aiming for the main point, a strategy referred to in Chinese rhetorics as "KAI MEN JIAN SHAN" ("You open the door and are confronted with the mountains"), Chinese speakers prefer a pattern of organizing information, where first of all a common framework of information becomes established, before the speakers utter their

¹⁴ To what extent Zheng uses nonverbal contextualization cues cannot be taken into consideration.

main statement.¹⁵ This technique of structuring information is in tune with the rhetoric principles of "*HUA LONG DIAN JING*" ("When you paint a dragon, you put in the eyes at the end." Or: "You add the finishing touch to the composition"): First you should paint the outline contours before you get to the most precious part. If you paint in the eyes before, the dragon will fly off - and your argument is lost. German interactants, however, often show signs of impatience when they are confronted with Chinese rhetoric conventions: Beating around the bush, not being able to find out what the Chinese are trying to get at... such are the comments German interactants made after listening to their tapes.

In the following segment of a conversation the German D asks the Chinese Bu, whether she thinks life in China is harder for women than for men:

- BU1
 6Bu: ja. WIRKLICH
 yes. INDEED
 7D: und inwiefern?
 and in what way?
 8Bu: WEI::L in Schina war früher feudalistisch
 BE:::CAUSE in China was formerly feudalistic
 9 und so viele schlechte Situation für
 and lots of bad situation for
 10 die Frauen damals. und man kann
 women at those times. and one can
 11 jetzt - ich glaube man kann jetzt nicht
 now - I believe one cannot say now
 12 so sagen also jetzt schon
 that nowadays
 13D: mhm
 14Bu: fast ganz ganz (0.5) also' - eh' anderes
 nearly everything has become very very (0.5) well- eh' different
 15 geworden als früher. kann man auch
 than before. one cannot say
 16 nicht SO sagen. es gibt so viele Nachfolge
 THAT. there is still so much left
 17 von Feudalismus
 from feudalism
 18D: mhm
 19 DESHALB also die Sch die Frauen besonders
 THEREFORE the Sch the women especially
 20 die also die eh:m ein bißchen emanzipiert oder
 those who eh:m are a bit emancipated or
 21 so kann man sagen es gibt verschiedene Bedingungen.
 one can say there are different conditions
 22 die sehr schwierig sind für diese Frauen
 which are very difficult for these women.

Instead of answering D's question right away, Bu first of all provides the necessary background information - starting with the conjunction "weil" (because) (8-17). Finally in line 19 she states - introduced with "DESHALB" (therefore) - the answer, which we would have expected to get at the beginning rather than at the end. The way Bu presents her arguments are rather common among Chinese speakers: The opening lines do not provide a preview statement indicating the direction of the information to come (such as "first of all, you have to know that...").¹⁶ The connective pair "because ... therefore" ("yinwei... suoyi") here, works as

¹⁵ Young (1982) makes the same observation in her analysis of differences between Chinese and American discourse strategies.

¹⁶ See also Young's (1982) analysis of Chinese discourse structures.

an indication that the speaker is now going to build up the framework (the "but"-part), before she will introduce the main argument (the "therefore"-part). These connectives can, however, be deleted, as is commonly the case in Chinese discourse.

German recipients often have problems with the Chinese way of organizing discourse: The answers of the Chinese participants seem to have no direct relationship to the preceding questions and do not overtly respond to what the questioner wants to know. They instead provide a list of facts which are only loosely connected with the topic.

When contextualization conventions in the area of discourse pragmatics are not shared, participants are unable to agree on what communicative task is being enacted and thus are unable to predict where the conversation is going or how to integrate what is said into a coherent activity.

The following transcript is part of an interaction between the Chinese Ma and the German T. Ma consults T, a representative of a German institution during her office hours. Ma works hard at trying to persuade T that she should intervene at her institution so that Chinese scientists would get Ph.D. scholarships. After eight minutes of arguing T emphasizes that she sees no possibility of intervening:

MA 3

- 1T: da bin ich ganz sicher.
I am very sure about this.
- 2Ma: eh:m. zur Zeite gibt es ehm: (0.3)
eh:m. at the moment there are ehm: (0.3)
- 3 ((Räuspern)) gibt es verschiedene
((clears his throat)) there are different
- 4 ehm: (0.4) ausländ eh ausländische
ehm: (0.4) forei eh foreign
- 5 Studenten oder Gast eh Wissenschaftler
students or visiting eh scholars
- 6 ehm ((Räuspern)) zu Beispiel ehm
ehm ((clears his throat)) for example ehm
- 7 wie wie uns ehm - w wir wir brauchen ehm
like like us ehm - w we we we need ehm
- 8 Geld wir brauchen Geld von ehm -
money we need money from ehm -
- 9 unsere Legierung - unde a:ndere Leute ehm -
our government - ande o:ther people ehm -
- 10 (0.3) hab ha hat haben ehm -
(0.3) hav ha has have ehm -
- 11 eigenen GELD eigen'eigen Geld.
own MONEY own'own money.
- 12 eh - ehm der erst eh die erst die
eh - ehm the first eh the first the
- 13 ersten Grupp M Menschen heißt ehm -
first group of p people is called ehm -
- 14 gongfei gongpai. und eh zweitens eh
gongfei gongpai. and eh second eh
- 15 Grupp eh - ehm' Menschen heißt
group eh - ehm' people is called
- 16 zifei, zifei gongpai. unde ehm die
zifei, zifei gongpai. ande ehm the
- 17 Unterschiede ((Räuspern)) zwischen
differences ((clears his throat)) between
- 18 diese ehm h Gruppen ehm ist:e HAUPTSÄCHLICH
these ehm h groups ehm is:e MAINLY
- 19 ehm' Geld . (-) GELD.
ehm' money. (-) MONEY.

- 20T: ja.
 21Ma: ja. ehm ((Räuspern)) weil ehm von
yeah. ehm ((clears his throat)) because ehm from
 22 (?) zweite Gruppe Menschen (-)
(?) second group of people(-)
 23 ehm::: ka können sie (-) ehm' lang
ehm::: ca can they (-) ehm' long
 24 länger als Jahre' als EIN Jahr oder
longer than years' than ONE year or
 25 ehm einige eh ein paar Jahre ehm
ehm some eh a few years ehm
 26 bleiben.
stay.
 27T: ja, aber SIE gehören zur ERSTEN
yeah, but YOU belong to the FIRST
 28 Gruppe=
group
 29Ma: =ja=
=yeah=
 30T: =der Regierungsstipendiaten
= of the people who get their scholarship from the goverment
 31Ma: ja. ja.
yeah. yeah.
 32T: und re erzählen Sie mir hier nichts
and don't re tell me anything
 33 /von der zweiten Gruppe/ sondern von sich
/about the second group/ but about yourself
 34Ma: / wenn eh wenn i: u: /
/ if eh if I: u:/
 35Ma: ja. wenn ehm: ich KEINE eh KEIN
yeah. if ehm: I don't gets eh get
 36 Geld eh (-) bekommen eh bekomme,
ANYONE eh ANY money eh
 37 dann muß ich:e sofort zurückkommen,
then I must come back immediately

This transcript has been presented at some length in order to show the interactional dynamics of the encounter: The interactants fail to negotiate a suitable way of signalling the status of the provided information. Ma's strategies reflect Chinese discourse conventions: First he unrolls the necessary background information to establish the situational framework for his main argument, before this argument is actually presented. In this segment part of the background information is the explanation about the two different groups of Chinese academics. However, T's impatience and her interruption (27) make it impossible for Ma to get to his main point. T's intervention (27-33) demonstrates what she treats as being the source of the trouble: She explicitly articulates her annoyance about Ma's seemingly failure to come to the point, and demonstrates that she doesn't see the relevance of his long explanation and thus his orientation work: "ja, but YOU belong to the FIRST group of the people who get the scholarship from the government and don't re tell me anything about the second group but about yourself" (27-33). T thus explicitly demands that Ma gets to his point instead of telling her seemingly irrelevant background information. As Goffman (1983) points out, thematic tying is an important discourse strategy, through which the speaker connects her/his utterance to the given context and orients her/his presentation of information to the cognitive state of the recipient. Here however, Ma unrolls the background information without signalling its relationship to the discourse topic. In line 2 he starts with an apparently incoherent utterance, which does not seem connected to the point at issue.

A Chinese informant, who listened to this text segment, provided the following interpretation:

"Ma tries to be polite. He wants to explain the whole background. But T just doesn't give him a chance, to get to his point. She interrupts him, before he can present his main idea."

2.5. Contextualizing social and interactional roles

The fifth question "*What social and interactional roles are we negotiating?*" refers to the negotiation of the mutual relationship and to ritual work (such as face-work) in general. Cultural differences in contextualization may result in face-threatening activities and lead to miscommunication. The Chinese laughter accompanying face-threatening activities serves as an example. Almost every Chinese travel-story and "survival kit" mentions the Chinese laughter as part of an "exotic encounter".¹⁷

In the following transcript segment (taken from the same conversation as MA 3) the Chinese participant Ma uses laugh tokens during aggravated argumentative sequences as contextualization cues for the face-threatening situation. But instead of ending the confrontation by applying face-work techniques or change of topic strategies, the German participant T reinforces the confrontation by repeating the disagreement and prosodically focussing on the dissent elements.

MA 4

- 35Ma: ja. wenn ehm: ich KEINE eh KEIN
yeah. if ehm: I don't get eh get
- 36 Geld eh (-) bekommen eh bekomme,
ANY eh (-) ANY money eh
- 37 dann muß ich:e sofort zurückkommen,
then I must come back immediately
- 38 aber wenn ich (-) ehm (-) GELD von deutschen
but when I (-) ehm (-) get MONEY from a German
- 39 ProfesSOR bekomme, dann kann ich eh
profesSOR, then I can eh
- 40 dort(-) bleiben. (0.3) ja. sicher.
stay (-) there. (0.3) ja. surely.
- 41T: eh:: 'Herr Ma ich glaube es NICHT
eh:: 'Mr Ma I do NOT believe this
- 42Ma: ((kichert)) ach
((giggles)) ach
- 43T: Herr Ma, ICH muß Ihnen leider
Mr Ma, sorry but I have to tell you
- 44 sagen, ICH glaube das nicht, ne'
I do not believe this, ne'
- 45Ma: ah ja. ((kichert))
ah yes. ((giggles))
- 54Ma: ...
ich habe gehört, daß der DAAD ehm
I heard that the DAAD ehm
- 55 dem ProfesSOR SAGEN WIRD ehm, der
WILL TELL the profesSOR ehm, this
- 56 Studente aus Schina ist ist: eh ein
student from China gets gets: eh a
- 57 Stipendiet ehm:: (-) brauchen Sie, brauchen
scholarship ehm:: (-) you need, need
- 58 oder müssen Sie ehm IHN eh GELD GEBEN.

17 Bonavia (1987:74ff.).

- 59 *or have to give ehm HIM eh MONEY.*
 60 (0.5)
 60 n nicht eh KEIN Geld geben.
n not eh NO money give.
 61T: wo haben Sie das gehört(.....)?
where did you hear this (.....)?
 62Ma: ehm: ehm jemand eh von jemand
ehm: ehm someone eh from someone
 63T: + VON WEM?+
 + FROM WHOM?+
 64Ma: hahaihihi
 65T: ++ VON WEM?++
 ++ FROM WHOM?++
 66Ma: eh VIELE LEUTE (-) eh (.....)
eh MANY PEOPLE (-) eh (.....)
 67T: ICH MÖCHTE NAMEN. SAGEN SIE MIR
I WANT NAMES. TELL ME
 68 VON WEM.
 FROM WHOM.
 69Ma: hahahihihhi (von wem?) hihi vie((hi))le hihi Leute hihi
hahahihihhi (from whom?) hihi ma((hi))ny hihi people hihi
 70T: ++ VON WEM?++ NAMEN BITTE.
 ++ FROM WHOM? ++ NAMES PLEASE.
 71Ma: Namen bitte?
 NAMES PLEASE?
 72T: ja von WEN haben Sie das GEHÖRT?
ja from WHOM did you HEAR this?

The moment T confronts him with strongly face-threatening utterances and steps beyond the limits of ritual politeness (line 63; 67), Ma reacts by giggling. T's answer to Ma's laughing demonstrates her interpretation: she takes the laugh tokens as a sign that her request is not taken seriously. This interpretation leads to interactional moves which diametrically oppose Ma's intention: T insists on her requests and repeats it with marked aggressiveness in her voice.

Now let me present a second example, where contextualization cues meant to indicate a face-threatening situation, but due to misinterpretation of the contextualization cues at hand, the incident becomes more and more embarrassing. The transcript is part of a longer conversation between the Chinese Bao and the German F and A:

BAO 2

- 1F: nu: wa was bedeutet des für dich, du warst
well: wha what does it mean for you,
 2 doch bevor du verheiratet warst sicherlich
I assume you were before you got married you surely
 3 auch mit irgendeinem andern Mann noch
had another man before
 4 zusammen (-)
 that (-)
 5 oder?
 didn't you?
 6 (0.5)
 7 oder oder bist du oder ist ER dein
 or or are you or is HE your
 8 erster Mann?
 first man?
 9Bao: ja
 yea
 10F: ((hohe Stimme)) ER ist dein erster Man/n?/
 ((high pitch)) HE is your first ma/n?/

11 Bao: /ja/
/yes/
12 (0.6)

By keeping silent and making the absence of a sequentially relevant answer accountable, Bao contextualizes that F's question has gone beyond the limits of intimacy. The situation is becoming increasingly embarrassing. From a sequential point of view it is striking that Bao's utterance, in which she makes clear that she has not had another man (line 9), is not produced immediately after F's question, but delayed by different means: Bao does not react to F's first question (line 1-4) and a short pause occurs. F's further attempt to elicit a response by adding a subsequent "oder?" does not bring the expected answer. Bao's minimal reaction "ja" indicates her unwillingness to expand on this topic. F's further expansion of the topic demonstrates that she does not realize the embarrassment of the situation. F did not interpret Bao's silence as a response to her first pair part (question). As my Chinese informants pointed out, the production of silence as a response to a question, indicates that the participant does not wish to pursue the topic at issue. Here we have an example for what Bateson (1985) calls a "complementary schismogenesis" in the situation of intercultural contact. The interaction of the two subsystems keeps on producing a progressively growing difference and distance between the interactants. While Bao tries to indicate the face-threatening situation by keeping silent, F interprets the absence of the second pair part as an indication of an understanding problem and thus reformulates the face-threatening question.

A Chinese informant comments this segment of data as follows:

"Well, it is quite embarrassing for her to answer. That's why she keeps quiet. We Chinese understand her silence right away. She doesn't want to talk about it. But the German often don't understand this kind of silence and then they keep on asking and asking, which makes it even more embarrassing."

3. Conclusion

As my data show even Chinese with a good command of the German language rely on their own contextualization conventions, which are partly different from the German ones. Contextualization conventions are sensitive to participants' understanding of the goals of the particular interaction and a lack of shared conventions can prevent interactants from negotiating a mutual understanding of the situation at hand.

Culturally specific contextualization cues can - as the data have shown - operate on several different layers of context:

- 1) Different conventions of signalling active listenership and conversational involvement may render focussed interaction more difficult or partly impossible.
- 2) Due to differences in the social repertoire of knowledge the design of an utterance often turns out to be inadequate in its orientation toward the recipients.
- 3) Participants of intercultural communication are furthermore frequently confronted with different conventions to signal interactive modi and activity types.
- 4) The choice of a specific communicative genre which in one culture is commonly used to solve certain communicative problems can turn out to be inadequate in another culture.
- 5) A further layer of context that can be affected by differences in contextualization conventions is related to discourse pragmatics: Different linguistic and paralinguistic cues to signal background and main information, to indicate focussed information and discourse cohesion may be employed.
- 6) Finally different contextualization conventions concerning facework techniques, indicating social relationships and other aspects of the "ritual order" (Goffman) might clash and lead to misinterpretation, communicative failure and mutual frustration.

As Schütz (1944) points out, in intercultural encounters, orientation patterns, which are habitually, automatically and half-consciously available to the interactants and used to pro-

vide typical solutions for typical problems, now turn out to be problematic. The standardized scheme of cultural pattern handed down to members of a cultural group by their ancestors, teachers, authorities etc. as an unquestioned and unquestionable guide for handling everyday interactions suddenly turn out to be insufficient or even misleading. The flow of habit becomes interrupted and gives rise to uncertainty, stereotyping and crises.

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Appendix: Transcription System Key

/ja das/ finde ich auch	conversational overlap
/du ab/	
(0.5)	pauses of indicated length (in seconds)
(-)	pauses shorter than 0.3 seconds
(???)	unintelligible text
(gestern)	a guess at an unclear word
=	continuous utterances
?	high rise tone
˘	low rise tone
.	low fall tone
,	slight rise
a:	lengthened segments
leise	low volume
sehr leise	very low volume
NEIN	extra prominence
+schneller+	accelerated tempo
++viel schneller++	very accelerated tempo
mo((hi))mentan	laugh particles within the utterance
HAHAHA	loud laughter
hihi	giggling
((hustet))	nonlexical phenomena (e.g.coughing).